

# Writing about Film



# Writing about Film: A Reader

By R. J. Cardullo



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*Writing about Film: A Reader*

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# INTRODUCTION: “THE FILM’S THE THING”

## The Film Experience

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Film editing, or the instantaneous replacement of one moving visual field with another, was once not part of our daily experience. So nothing in 400 million years of vertebrate evolution prepared us for the visual assault of cinema. But amazingly enough, the process succeeded and we became accommodated to the idea of motion pictures. Even more, a mysterious extra meaning was gained from the juxtaposition of two images that was not present in either of the shots themselves. In short, we discovered that the human mind was predisposed to cinematic grammar as if it were an entirely natural, inborn language. Perhaps it is inborn, because we spend one-third of our lives in the nightly world of dreams. There, images are fragmented and different realities collide abruptly with what seems to have great meaning. In this way we can see film editing as, probably unwittingly, employing the power and means of dream.

For many millions of years, then, human beings were apparently carrying within them the ability to respond to film and were unconsciously awaiting its arrival in order to employ their dream-faculty more fully. Some of us have long believed that, through more recent centuries, theater artists and audiences themselves had also been longing for the film to be invented even without a clue that there could be such a medium. Many tricks of stagecraft in those centuries (particularly the nineteenth) were, without knowing it, attempting to be cross-cuts and superimpositions, or double exposures. Some dramatists even imagined their work in forms and perspectives that anticipated the birth of the cinema (most notably, and excitingly, Georg Büchner in *Danton's Death* [1835]). In his essay “Dickens, Griffith, and the Film Today,” Sergei Eisenstein shows how the novel itself—specifically, the novels of Charles Dickens—provided D. W. Griffith with a number of cinematic techniques, including equivalents to fades, dissolves, the breakdown into shots, and the concept of parallel editing. These novelistic and theatrical attempts at prognostication a few centuries earlier are puny stuff, though,

because for millions of years homo sapiens had been subliminally prepared for the intricacies of film, had indeed been getting ready for them every night. Indeed, in a sense the last century, the mere centenary of film's existence, was the emotional and psychological goal of the ages—and continues to be into the twenty-first century.

When the first moving picture flashed onto a screen, the double life of all human beings thus became intensified. That double life consists, on the one hand, of actions and words and surfaces, and, on the other, of secrets and self-knowledges or self-ignorances, self-ignorings. That double life has been part of man's existence ever since art and religion were invented to make sure that he became aware of it. In the past 150 years or so, religion has receded further and further as revealer of that double life, and art has taken over more and more of the function; when film art came along, it made that revelation of doubleness inescapable, in fact more attractive. To wit: on the screen are facts, which at the same time are symbols; for this reason, they invoke doubleness at every moment, in every kind of picture. They stir up the concealments in our lives, both those concealments we like and those we do not like; they shake our histories, our hopes, and our heartbreaks into consciousness. Not completely, by any means. (Who could stand it?) And not more grandly or deeply than do the other arts. But more quickly and surely, because these facts, these symbols do their stirring and shaking with visuals as well as with motion, serially and cumulatively.

Think of this process as applying to every frame of film and it is clear that when we sit before a screen, we run risks unprecedented in human history. A poem may or may not touch us; a play or novel may never get near us. But movies are inescapable. (In the case of poor films, we often have the sensation of fighting our way *out* of them.) When two screen lovers kiss, in any picture, that kiss has a minimum inescapability that is stronger than in other arts—both as an action before us and a metaphor for the “kissingness” in our own lives. Each of us is pinned privately to such a kiss in some degree of pleasure or pain or enlightenment. In romances or tragedies, in period films or modern dramas, in musical comedies or historical epics, in Westerns or farces, our beings—kissing or otherwise—are in some measure summoned up before us, in our own private visions. And I would like to suggest that the fundamental way, conscious or not, in which we determine the quality of a film is by the degree to which the re-experiencing of ourselves coincides with our pride, our shames, our hopes, our honor.

Finally, it follows, distinctions among movies arise from the way they please or displease us with ourselves: not *whether* they please or displease but *how*. This is true, I believe, in every art today; it is not a cinema monopoly. But in the cinema it has become more true more swiftly and decisively because film has a much smaller heritage of received aesthetics to reassess; because film is bound more closely to the future than other arts seem to be (the reason is that, by its very episodic or “journeying” form, film reflects for viewers the belief that the world is a place in



which man can leave the past behind and create his own future); and because film confronts us so immediately, so seductively, and so shockingly (especially on the larger-than-life screen) with at least some of the truth about what we have been doing with ourselves. To the extent that film exposes the viewer to this truth about himself, in his experience of the world or of fantasy, in his options for action or for privacy, to the extent that he can thus accept a film as worthy of himself or better than himself—to that extent a film is necessary to him. And it is that necessity, I am arguing, that ultimately sets its value.

Throughout history, two factors have formed people's taste in any art, their valuing of it, that is: knowledge of that art and knowledge of life. Obviously this is still true, but the function of taste seems to be altering. As formalist aesthetic canons have come to seem less and less tenable, standards in art and life have become more and more congruent, and as a result the function of taste is increasingly the selection and appraisal of the works that are most valuable—and most necessary—to the individual's very existence. So our means for evaluating films naturally become more and more involved with our means for evaluating experience; aesthetic standards do not become identical with standards in life but they are certainly related—and, one hopes, somewhat braver.

Of course the whole process means that human beings feed on themselves, on their own lives variously rearranged by art, as a source of values. But despite other prevalent beliefs about the past connected with theology and religion, we are coming to see that people have always been the source of their own values. In the century in which this responsibility, this liberation, became increasingly apparent—the twentieth—the intellect of man simultaneously provided a new art form, the film, to make the most of it.

That art form is obviously still with us, and now, in the twenty-first century, more than ever, it seems. And its critics proliferate in number, in part because of what I describe above: the “personal” element involved in the watching of any movie, and the ease nowadays with which, through the Internet, one can communicate that personal response to others. If, as Oscar Wilde once said, “The highest form of criticism is a mode of autobiography” (48)—because only by “intensifying his own personality” could the critic interpret the personality and work of others—then film criticism must be an even higher form.

## **The Critic as Humanist**

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As the highest form of autobiography, such criticism is necessarily humanistic in its approach. That approach sees films as an art like other arts, and film criticism as a human activity practiced by the educated, cultured person. Like the classical humanism of the Renaissance, such criticism asserts the dignity and worth of individuals and their capacity for self-realization, in this instance through the

application of reason as well as feeling to the activity (followed by the recollection) of watching a movie. Thus the humanistic approach to cinema attempts to make sense of the individual's emotional and intellectual, *personal* experience of a film, to draw conclusions about the value of that experience, and to communicate that value to others.

Seeing in film, then, the same potential for art that countless generations have traditionally found in painting, music, and literature—the kind of art that lifts the human spirit and stimulates the human mind—the humanist film critic looks for a similar aesthetic experience in the movies. What can movies tell us about the human condition? How do they reflect an intellectual interest in politics, religion, history, or philosophy? What kinds of ideas are hidden beneath the surface of a film? How can we interpret its symbols? How do form and content interact to convey the filmmaker's meaning? Is there an artist behind the creation of a film? What relationship exists between this particular film or this genre of film and the world outside the movie theater? How shall we rank the quality of this motion picture compared to some ideal excellence or compared to the best cinema that has been produced in the past? These questions are familiar, for they are the same ones asked of any art form. They are not specific to film, but specific to aesthetic inquiry in general.

Because of the interest in film criticism displayed by people from a wide variety of fields, the humanistic approach presupposes that writer and reader have a certain familiarity with the general principles of aesthetic inquiry as articulated by Western culture from the time of the Greeks to the present. Film is simply assumed to be of the same order as other art forms and, therefore, subject to similar investigation. This was not always the case for the cinema, of course, because traditional definitions of art imply a high moral purpose and a complex aesthetic scheme. Art has always been defined as something qualitatively different from entertainment, in other words, and most commentators, at least in the United States, saw movies as nothing more than entertainment until after World War II.

W. R. Robinson, writing in the late 1960s, exemplifies the change of view that had taken place and that still characterizes the way in which the intellectual community looks at film. He justifies critical inquiry into movies by suggesting that they make the same appeal to the spectator as do the other arts, an assertion that also implies that the spectator is a cultured individual familiar with such appeals. Robinson states that a movie engages the viewer in a moral and aesthetic dialogue that demands some sort of response, even if only to decide whether the movie was worth attending in the first place:

In short, everyone instinctively recognizes that a movie—all art, in fact—invites him to exercise his taste in making a value judgment. He senses that a value assertion has been made and that a reply is demanded of him. And

except for the most diffident, everybody also senses that he is qualified to reply. (119)

Surely everyone seeing a film will make that first value judgment, even if it is based only on immediate emotional grounds; the humanist simply goes further, probing more deeply into those initial responses, recognizing the potential for moral and intellectual interchange.

The humanist, then, is largely self-defined, and perhaps is simply a person who takes an interest in the subject at hand—here, film. A general knowledge of literature, drama, and the fine arts will help him to indulge that interest, to relate the cinematic experience to other artistic experiences. For the humanist, critical investigation into, intellectual curiosity about, and logical analysis of all aspects of experience, inside as well as outside the artwork, are habitual responses to life. Looking closely at the filmic experience, trying to discern there the mark of human excellence or potential, is no different from looking closely at the experience of reading novels, viewing paintings, or listening to music. The humanist seeks to understand human nature and mankind's place in the scheme of things, asking such traditional questions as "Who are we?" and "What is life all about?"

As Robert Richardson has pointed out, the answers to these questions may be found in movies:

Perhaps man is no longer the measure of all things, but man remains the measure of the world on film. The films of Jean Renoir, for example, show just this emphasis on the desirability of being human; it is the main theme of *Grand Illusion* and of other films. *La strada*, revolving around three people whom psychology would call abnormal, nevertheless manages to find and then insist on humanness in the animal Zampano, in the half-wit Gelsomina, and in the Fool. The film has the pace and power of a Greek tragedy; its theme, like that of Sophocles' *Ajax*, might be said to be an examination of what it is to be human. (128-129)

The humanist, finally, looks for representations in film of general human values, the truths of human experience as they relate to the common or universal aspects of existence: birth, death, love, aggression, happiness, sorrow. He seeks an answer to the question, "What is there in this film or in my experience of it that will help me understand the variety and complexity of the human heart and mind?" Finding out more about a particular film, a genre, a director's concerns and interests, or the influences of society on the production of movies—all of these can make the movie going experience more meaningful, and all of them make up the province of the humanistic critic and his readers. It is only such an alchemy of the mind that can enlarge or expand the merely physical and emotional sensation of watching shadows in the dark.

## The History of Film for Cultured Audiences

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By the time the movies became a reality, at the end of the nineteenth century, the intellectual community had clearly demarcated the differences between highbrow and lowbrow art, between artworks seriously aimed at discerning audiences and those aimed at the unwashed masses. Movies were popular entertainment similar in form and function to dime novels, circuses, and the music hall, and thus were not worth either experiencing or commenting upon as far as intellectuals were concerned. Nevertheless, over the years, there appeared a few cultured individuals who found in the movies something of human relevance for the discerning mind.

Vachel Lindsay, an American poet, in 1915 wrote a book-length study, *The Art of the Moving Picture*, in which he attempted to distinguish the properties of film from those of other arts and to synthesize the properties of other arts within the one art of cinema. In the following year, Hugo Münsterberg, an eminent psychologist on the faculty at Harvard, explored the psychological relationship between the film viewer and the screen image in his book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*. Writing near the very beginning of the history of motion pictures, Münsterberg was aware of the way in which early films recorded the activities of the world in front of the camera, thereby performing an educational or instructional, descriptive function. But he makes an excellent case for the position that the motion picture's greatest strength lies in its ability to portray human emotion. "To picture emotions must be the central aim of the photoplay" (48), writes Münsterberg. He also goes on to suggest that, as in some of the other arts, the representation of the human heart and mind on film successfully raises moral issues; for him, film narrative presents the opportunity for making moral judgments, both on the part of the moviemaker and of the audience. The truth of the representation must be tested against the truth of the viewer's own experience of the world.

Though, in one sense, these early books by a poet and a psychologist might be classed as works of film theory rather than as evaluations of specific films, they were both written by cultured individuals who were not primarily film scholars or critics. And both felt compelled to argue that, despite continued neglect by the intellectual community, the cinema deserved a place alongside the time-honored arts of literature, music, and painting. For the most part, Lindsay's and Münsterberg's rhetoric failed to convince their peers—at least in the United States. In Europe, on the other hand, intellectuals had been attracted to filmmaking from the birth of the medium. (France, for example, had initiated the extensive filming of classic plays and novels well before the First World War.) So it is not surprising that all over Europe—in Paris, Berlin, Moscow—during the 1920s, intellectuals and artists talked and wrote about the movies as the equivalent of the other arts. Between the world wars in America, however, intellectuals scarcely noted the existence of the medium. There were, of course, some thoughtful reviews of specific

films in major periodicals by critics more commonly given to writing about high-class literature. Edmund Wilson, Aldous Huxley, and Robert E. Sherwood were among the few who did not condescend when they occasionally wrote about the films of the 1920s and 1930s.

Other reviewers who wrote regularly about specific films from the 1930s through the 1950s, in magazines intended for a cultured readership, and who accepted the film as worthy of intellectual scrutiny, included Harry Alan Potamkin, Otis Ferguson, Robert Warshow, and James Agee. These writers, though clearly identifiable under the title “reviewers,” also wrote what can be considered humanistic criticism, since their perceptions about film included thoughtful references to contemporary ideas in psychology, sociology, politics, and aesthetics that would be understood by a cultured audience. They did not simply recount the plot of a film and say whether they liked it or not, but went further in trying to relate their experiences of individual movies to the intellectual concerns of the day. (Robert Warshow, for example, in his 1954 essay titled “The Westerner,” about the hero of western movies, as well as in his 1948 piece “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” discusses not simply a number of films, but also the American fascination with violence.)

Nevertheless, the intellectual community as a whole did not make film one of its concerns until after the Second World War. In part because of the pressure of returning veterans, some of whom had seen non-Hollywood films while stationed abroad, and in part because of an increase in experimental or avant-garde filmmaking by members of the art community who were working in academic departments, film societies sprang up on college campuses all over the U.S. In addition to providing inexpensive entertainment to students making do on the G.I. Bill, the film societies introduced Americans to foreign films like those from Italy, which attempted to treat postwar problems realistically, to present life as it was lived and not as it was dramatized or glamorized in the well-known, predictable genres of most Hollywood films. The experience of watching such movies invited more organization on the part of film societies, and soon more or less random exposure to the classics of world cinema, whether they were silents or sound pictures, became codified into college courses.

The result was that by the late 1950s and early 1960s, a large number of college-educated Americans had come to realize that movies existed which were not simply escapist entertainment, but which held possibilities for human enrichment similar to the possibilities offered by the more traditional arts of drama, painting, and literature. The early films of Ingmar Bergman (e.g., *The Seventh Seal*, 1957) and Federico Fellini (e.g., *La strada*, 1954) were the first to be reviewed and praised by highbrow critics in prestigious journals. The first films of the French New Wave—François Truffaut’s *The Four Hundred Blows*, Jean-Luc Godard’s *Breathless*, and Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima, mon amour*—won prizes at Cannes in 1959.

Anyone who claimed to be an intellectual, a cultured individual who was aware of the artistic trends in contemporary life, had to see these pictures. A circuit of art-house movie theaters eventually appeared that featured such films, which were distributed all over the country. People came not to forget their cares, as they did at Hollywood movies, but to think about the difficulties and problems of living in the nuclear age.

And a lively and informed criticism of these movies began to appear in print, not only in intellectual magazines like *The Nation* and *The New Republic* but also in hundreds of highly literate books by writers from a wide variety of disciplines, as the intellectual community sought to map out this new area of study. In the early 1970s, moreover, several universities began to sponsor new journals devoted to a wide-ranging, widely practiced exploration of the cinema, such as *Film Heritage* and *Literature/Film Quarterly*. During the late 1970s and well into the 1980s, however, as film studies in the academic world became more specialized and thereby “legitimized,” evolving on many campuses into doctorate-granting departments, fewer and fewer writers from other disciplines felt comfortable about making the crossover into movie criticism.

Nonetheless, the humanistic approach is still alive and well anywhere and any time so-called generalists, however few in number, decide to analyze movies. In addition, one cannot forget the thriving interest in humanist film criticism registered by the countless number of students in introductory and advanced film classes who write papers. For the most part, these students are also generalists, familiar with the terms of humanist inquiry. Their speculations and intuitions about film topics, as any film teacher can attest, are often as eye-opening and enlightening as those of any professional academic. *All* students should be encouraged to realize that they might, upon careful reflection, produce a perception about the cinema that is highly original—and very good.

## The Personal Essay and the Pleasures of Intuitive Interpretation

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The humanistic approach to film criticism is thus open to all. It requires only a general background in the arts, the experience of film going, and the habit of reading and writing. It presupposes that criticism—looking rationally and sympathetically at the world in an attempt to understand it and its inhabitants better—is an important human function. At the same time, criticism confers more than simply understanding on its practitioners: it also gives great pleasure, the very human pleasure of discovering something about a film that is new and original. This pleasure occurs during the critical act itself, when a person sits down to organize into written form the vague and ephemeral impressions of the actual experience of movie going. Such writing is hard work and doesn’t always reach the

highest level; great thoughts and insights don't always come. Still, something about the concentration necessary for writing can coalesce and distill distinct ideas and feelings into substantial critical discourse.

The first step for the potential writer, of course, is to think of films as something more than mere escapist entertainment for a mass audience, and simultaneously to draw the conclusion that more than a cursory glance at the movies can yield intellectual satisfactions. From this perspective, the humanist critic can find significant perceptions to express not only about the manifestly complex films made by foreign filmmakers, but also about mainstream movies as well. The important point is that humanists look inward, examining their own responses in more than a cursory way, and try to understand what it was that produced their initial reaction to the picture in question. People usually know whether they liked or disliked a particular movie; but the humanist is not satisfied by such simplistic response: he wants to know precisely why he liked or disliked the work. What was it, in particular, that made the film good or bad? Or what made the film so boring, pretentious, thrilling, saddening, hysterical, or rewarding? The humanist trusts intuition first, then tries rationally to elaborate the reasons why he intuitively responded in this or that way. It is the very articulate sharing of his responses to the cinema on a cultivated level that distinguishes the humanist film critic from the mere movie reviewer.

Paul Ricoeur, a noted French philosopher, has described the process of the critic's immersion in a text, cinematic or otherwise, as a movement through three stages. The first he calls "understanding" (71ff.), the moment when a text makes its power clear to the person experiencing it. Having seen a particular film, for example, the viewer is struck by the insistence with which it urges itself on his own life. We are all aware that some films do not have such an appeal; we see them, pass the time, and forget about them. When this recognition of insistence or pertinence does take place, however, the text demands some "explanation." This is Ricoeur's second stage. Dudley Andrew, in *Concepts of Film Theory* (1984), says that the process of "explanation" is necessarily a reductive one, as the text is broken down into its various parts in order to unlock its hold on us. "The text is situated in its various contexts . . . and is subjected to . . . study and critique until the particularity of its appeal is explained as an effect of these generating forces" (181).

In a sense this second stage of analysis may remove us from the power of the text as felt during the moment of "understanding," the first stage. But Ricoeur goes on to say that a third stage, "comprehension," follows. Here a return to the work, bolstered and enlarged by the explanatory process, renews—in a stronger and more comprehensive way—the initial sense that the viewer had of the text's insistent meaning for his own life. "Comprehension," Andrew writes, "is synthetic in that it listens to the wholeness of the text rather than breaking it down into parts: further, it responds to the cues it finds in the work, initiating a project of



meaning that is never complete” (182). The relationship between the text and the spectator thus becomes a living one. That is, one can return to certain films again and again because they never lose their ability to yield new or more elaborate meaning. It is this kind of film that humanist critics prefer to write about.

It should be mentioned at this point that the very broadness or generalness of the humanistic approach, its emphasis on an individual’s intuitive insight into and sensitive interpretation of a film, is also purported to be this approach’s major weakness. Though almost certainly leading to enrichment of the movie experience for those who read criticism, then go back to a film and see it in a new light, the humanist method is often criticized for its lack of intellectual rigor—that is, for its theoretically unfounded, methodologically unscientific, and unashamedly emotional assertions. Many feel that humanism is not a method at all, but simply a question of elevated taste; that it is only as good as the sensibility of the critic, only as convincing as the rhetoric of his prose. This approach causes problems for those who see the aim of criticism as the creation of an orderly, systematic body of knowledge about a subject, a body of knowledge aimed at achieving a consensus on the part of all informed participants. After all, one can always disagree with someone’s attempts to justify his intuitive idea of what such-and-such a film “really meant,” or an instinctive view of what makes a film “great,” by simply saying, “It didn’t strike me that way at all.” Truly objective criteria upon which to base one’s critical claims are not and could not be part of the humanistic approach to the cinema or any other art.

Nevertheless, when an article or a book makes intelligent sense, when we read someone’s thoughts and feelings about a particular film and the shock of recognition occurs—“Oh, sure, now I see. I was thinking it had to be something like that, but this says it all. He hit the nail right on the head!”—we feel the force of the humanistic approach. And despite the claims of the more methodical approaches, perhaps that fellow-feeling or shock of recognition is all we can ask for in the world of the arts, where human experience is the primary area of investigation. Physics may be able to argue for an objective quality to its findings about certain aspects of the natural world, but the perception of a film seems likely at all times to have a subjective element to it. And here, perhaps, is where the work of a humanist may be valid in more ways than the work of other, more specialized writers of film criticism.

Those academic specialists, like journalistic reviewers at the other end of the spectrum, are essentially engaged in a non-aesthetic enterprise, one that in the case of the academics may instead be termed sociological, historical, political, psychological, anthropological, or even “linguistic.” I am thinking of such methodologies as semiotics, (neo) formalism, Marxism, psychoanalysis and neo-Freudianism, feminism and gender studies, (post) structuralism and deconstruction, and race-and-ethnicity, none of which I will attempt to define because the meaning



is either abundantly transparent or hopelessly obscure. What these approaches all have in common is the attempt to turn film studies into a (pseudo) science and to use film as grist for one kind of ideological mill or other. This is not to say that there is *no* truth to any of these methods, only that each thinks *its* truth is the only truth and tries, through name-calling, to cow non-believers into public submission. No humanist (or genuine scientist, for that matter) would be guilty of such a crime against art—and hence humanity—for a humanist is by his very nature a pluralist with an interest in the human condition as it is experienced, rather than as it is “theoretized” or prescribed.

## The Work at Hand

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This particular humanistic collection of film criticism, *Writing about Film: A Reader*, attempts to offer readable, “unscientific” analyses, in survey-form, of what the author considers to be some of the most important international, as well as national, films and film artists, from the onset of the sound era to the first decade or so of the twenty-first century—or from a relatively early point in the history of motion pictures to the emergence of a new (digital) aesthetic. Written with university students in mind, these essays cover some of the central films—and central issues raised—in today’s world cinema courses and try to provide students with practical models to help them improve their own writing and analytical skills.

*Writing about Film: A Reader* proceeds chronologically and treats films from the following nations: France, Spain, Italy, England, Belgium, Russia, India, China, Germany, Japan, Hungary, Finland, Iran, Turkey, Sweden, and the United States. All these geographically representative films are artistic landmarks in one way or another, or in several ways: because of their very subject matter; because of their style and technical or formal advances; because of the historical periods, social settings, or religious backgrounds that gave impetus to their creation; and, ultimately, because of each picture’s unique vision of the world. All the entries are supplemented by bibliographies, film credits, film images, directors’ filmographies, a guide to film analysis, a glossary of film terms, a chronology of writing about film, topics for writing and discussion, an afterword on Shakespearean adaptation, and a thoroughgoing index. From a glance at the list of entries in *Writing about Film*, the reader will quickly discover not only that most of the films treated are international in origin, but that most of them are also “art films.” Hence, with a few exceptions, American entertainment movies—the bulk of the U.S. cinematic output—are excluded, and this requires some comment.

By about 1920, long after American films had cornered the world market, a rough, debatable, but persistent generalization had come into being: America made entertainment movies, while Europe (and later, the rest of the world) made

art films. Even back then some observers knew that there were great exceptions on both sides of that generalization, particularly the second part. (*Every* film making country makes entertainment movies; they are the major portion of every nation's industry. But no country's entertainment movies have had the success of American pictures.) That generalization has become increasingly suspect as it has become increasingly plain that good entertainment films cannot be made by the ungifted; further, that some directors of alpine talent have spent their whole careers making works of entertainment.

Nonetheless, for compact purposes here, the terms "entertainment" and "art" can serve to distinguish between those films, however well made and aesthetically rewarding, whose original purpose was to pass the time; and those films, however poorly made and aesthetically pretentious, whose original purpose was the illumination of experience and the extension of consciousness. In this view, the generalization about American and European films has some validity—less than was assumed for decades, still some validity. And that validity has determined the make-up of the collection of pieces in *Writing about Film: A Reader*. Which is to say that I write here predominantly about films made beyond American borders.

To be sure, I wish there were more American art films, but the nature of movie production in the United States—which is almost totally commercial and unsubsidized—prevents their creation. There was some hope, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, that this situation would change due to the collapse of the Hollywood studio system, the increase in foreign-film importation (and therefore foreign influence), the soaring expense of movie making, and the rise of the independent, "personal" film (to satisfy, as it were, the increasing number of "personal" critics such as Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Dwight Macdonald). However, American filmmakers soon learned that "independent" means independent only of the old assembly line. Indeed, in some ways the new system is more harried, less self-confident than the old studio procedure, where picture-people knew precisely what they were doing, or thought they did, and for whom they were doing it.

Put another way, independent production now means that, for each project, a producer not only needs to acquire a script and director and actors and facilities and distribution, he also has to acquire an audience—possibly a different audience for each film he produces, or at least not a relatively dependable general, homogeneous audience as in the past. No longer, then, is there any resemblance in the movie industry to a keeper throwing fish to trained seals. Making motion pictures is now much more like publishing books: each venture is a separate business enterprise, a separate risk and search. And the moment "personal" films do not make any money, they stop getting made in large numbers—as they have already done in comparison with the period of the late '60s and early '70s (a period treated in the interlude to *Writing about Film*), when we saw such personal, and in some cases

hugely moneymaking, pictures as *Easy Rider*, *The Hired Hand*, *Five Easy Pieces*, *Wanda*, *The Conversation*, *Badlands*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Alice's Restaurant*, *The Wild Bunch*, *The Rain People*, *The Graduate*, *Midnight Cowboy*, and many more.

The operative term at the start of the previous sentence is “money.” The operative term in *Writing about Film: A Reader*, by contrast, is “art.” I have nothing against money (who really does?), but I like my art divorced from it, or divorced from dependence on it, as much as possible. I hope the reader will agree and read on with pleasure—as well as profit.

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## PART I, 1919-1969

### Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*

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#### 1. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), dir. Robert Wiene

I want to consider all of the film of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), not simply the original story—of a Caligari finally exposed by Francis—which was housed by the director Robert Wiene in a framing story that exposes *Francis* as a madman. Most critics, Siegfried Kracauer significant among them, view the original story—a script by Hans Janowitz and Carl Mayer—as truly expressionistic, as an

exposure of “the madness inherent in authority” (Kracauer, 11). Kracauer goes so far as to call the original “an outspoken revolutionary story . . . whose meaning reveals itself unmistakably at the end, with the disclosure of the psychiatrist as Caligari: reason overpowers unreasonable power, insane authority is symbolically abolished” (9). Kracauer feels, as did Janowitz and Mayer, from whom he got his information, that Wiene perverted, if not reversed, the expressionistic intentions of the original story; that, in answer to mass desires or commercial instinct, “a revolutionary film was turned into a conformist one—following the much-used pattern of declaring some normal but troublesome individual insane and sending him to a lunatic asylum” (11). I wish to go against this view, and I wish to do so through a careful consideration of what happens in the original story as well as what happens outside it, in the “frame,” and by showing a more than superficial relationship between the original story and the framing one.

Kracauer’s opinions about the final film of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* rest on two erroneous assumptions. Number one, the doctor in the original story, or the story that the insane Francis tells to his older companion seated next to him on a bench, is *not* revealed to be Caligari, as Kracauer believes; he is revealed to be the Director of a mental hospital *posing* as one Dr. Caligari at fairs so that he can carry on his experiments with the somnambulist Cesare. The real Caligari is a doctor/mystic from the year 1703 who set out to discover whether a somnambulist, or someone in a trance, can be driven to murder; the Director wants to see if he can duplicate the historical Dr. Caligari’s experiments.

This is not a small point, because it indicates that the “historical” Dr. Caligari (historical for the purposes of this film, as there is no such figure as Dr. Caligari in actual history) is known to the student/artist Francis through his readings, as well as to the actual Director of the mental hospital to which Francis has been committed. The one-time student/artist Francis, now insane, makes up a story about the Director of the mental hospital in which the latter takes on the identity of Caligari to carry out his experiments, in secret, with Cesare. In the story, the somnambulist Cesare murders the Town Clerk, who reluctantly granted “Caligari” a permit to exhibit Cesare at the local fair, and he also kills Alan, Francis’s best friend. Cesare also almost murders Jane, the young woman whom both Francis and Alan love, before his master is exposed by Francis and the local authorities to be the force behind the murders and the Director of the area mental hospital, as well. “Caligari” himself goes crazy at the sight of the dead Cesare (who dies, oddly, of exhaustion—more on this later), is forced into a straitjacket, and is placed in a cell in the very hospital he once ran. This is the end of Francis’s story, or hallucination, told to an acquaintance within the insane asylum.

What happens shortly thereafter, back in the “real” world of the insane asylum where Francis resides, leads us to the second of Kracauer’s erroneous assumptions.

At the end of his story, Francis says (on title), “And since that day the madman [‘Caligari’] has never left his cell” (96). Then he is astonished to locate Cesare, who dies in Francis’s story, among the crowd in the hospital courtyard, and he is overjoyed to find Jane, whom he claimed to love in his story and still claims to love, but who totally ignores him. To see the Director again, however, strolling among his patients, is too much for Francis. In his story, Francis had confined Caligari to a cell, and now here he was out and free again! Francis goes berserk and grabs the Director, shouting, “You all believe I am mad. That is not true. It is the Director who is mad. He is Caligari, Caligari, Caligari!” (99). Francis is finally overcome by a group of attendants, placed in a straitjacket, and dragged into the same cell in which the “Caligari” of his story had been incarcerated. As the film ends, the Director turns from Francis’s bed and says, “At last I understand the nature of his madness. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari” (100).

Now Kracauer claims that the director, Robert Wiene, made Francis a “normal but troublesome individual” who, by virtue of the story he concocts, shows why he has been confined to an insane asylum. The Director of the asylum at last understands the case of his patient and feels that he will be able to cure him. “With this cheerful message, “ states Kracauer, “the audience is dismissed” (11). But Kracauer misunderstands the Director’s understanding of Francis’s case. Francis is not simply a lunatic who makes up terrible stories about nice people. Yes, he is insane, but he is an insane *murderer*. That is what the Director’s line, “He thinks I am that mystic Caligari,” tells us. Francis knows who the historical Dr. Caligari is, and so does the Director of the insane asylum. Francis is a murderer, and the nature of his “mad murdering,” which the Director now understands, is that he believes the Caligari of his student reading has made him murder, or has hypnotized him to do so. Why else would the Director say that the nature of Francis’s madness is his belief that he, the Director, is the mystic Caligari? Would this belief alone make a man a candidate for madness, and even if it did, could such a deviation completely explain the *nature* of his madness? I do not think so.

Seeking to re-rationalize his murdering (his companion on the bench has apparently not yet heard his story), to give it, however misguidedly or unconsciously, the sense or order that it did not have while he was killing, or to exorcise the demon (the mystic Caligari) who, he insanely believes, has driven him to commit murder, Francis, within the confined world of the asylum, has chosen the Director to play the part of, or pose as, Caligari, Cesare to be the murderer (Francis himself) under Caligari’s spell, and Jane as the object of his affections. His two victims—two people he probably murdered at random in his insanity, but who take on special expressionistic significance in his story—Alan and the Town Clerk, are conspicuously missing from Francis’s company in the hospital courtyard at the end of the film. Francis does not play himself, for he must be free in his mind to

capture and imprison the demon Caligari who is the source of all his problems.

What unites the real persons Cesare, Jane, and the Director is the fact that all three are the very opposite of what Francis makes them into in his story. Cesare, all timid and tidy, gazes raptly at a white flower throughout the final framing scene. Jane, enamored of Francis in the original story, does not even acknowledge him in the first framing scene (in which Francis is about to tell his story to the older man on the bench) or the last one. And the Director is a meticulously dressed, kind and gentle man, hardly the disheveled, evil, scheming “Caligari.” If, in his story, Francis turns these three into their opposites, then it follows, if my theory about his being a murderer is correct, that in the same story he should turn himself into his opposite: a perfectly sane, intent (in his pursuit of Alan’s murderer, as well as his studies), upright young man. He does so. He must be such a man in order to be able to track down “Caligari” with impunity.

He chooses Cesare to act in his place, because Cesare, as signified by his identification with a white flower, is in real life what Francis thinks that he himself is: peaceful, sensitive, loving. And, like Francis, Cesare is *not* a somnambulist (he becomes one, in Francis’s story, even as Francis believes he himself must have become one to commit murder). Indeed, it is not even clear that this man’s name is Cesare: when Francis calls him this upon locating him in the hospital courtyard in the final “frame,” Francis’s older companion is somewhat astonished and hurries away. “Cesare” is the name *Francis* has given, in his story, to the “real” Dr. Caligari’s somnambulist; that is, “Cesare” is the name he has the Director in the story use for his sleepwalker.

“Caesar” is also the name of the madman kept in the Doctor’s household in the first expressionistic drama, Strindberg’s *To Damascus* (1898). This “Caesar” functions, naturally, “as the leitmotiv of the hero’s megalomania” according to Walter Sokel, while “the Doctor appears as the hated and dreaded leitmotiv of the hero’s guilt” (36). I do not think that Janowitz and Mayer could possibly have been unaware of these two characters when they wrote their original draft of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, given the high regard in which Strindberg’s play was held by the dramatists of German expressionism. I also do not think that they failed to see the similarity between “Caligari,” the name of an Italian officer Janowitz pulled from his reading in *Unknown Letters of Stendhal* for use as the name of the imaginary mystic from 1703 (Kracauer, 7), and “(Gaius *Caesar*) Caligula,” the name of the Roman emperor from 37-41 A.D.

Note this description by Siegfried Kracauer of Caligari’s character, and then recall Caligula’s own senseless cruelty: “The character of Caligari stands for an unlimited authority that idolizes power as such and, to satisfy its lust for domination, ruthlessly violates all human rights and values” (9). My point is not to make a connection between Caligula’s Rome and Germany before the rise of



Hitler. I am trying to suggest that Cesare and Caligari are aspects of Francis's own insane murderous self (if one pronounces the last "e" in "Cesare" like the last "i" in "Caligari," one will hear a similarity in the names that is not so apparent to the eye); that Robert Wiene saw this in the original script of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* given to him to direct, but did not see it sufficiently embodied and decided to develop the script's potential to the fullest. In short, rather than pervert or reverse Janowitz and Mayer's original intentions, Wiene was serving those intentions by carrying them to their logical conclusion. If Janowitz and Mayer were now denying the intentions inherent *in the script*, that was, apparently as far as Wiene was concerned, their problem.

Francis's very name is an expressionistic projection or externalization—an "expression"—of what he thinks is his essence: the brotherly love of Saint Francis. No one calls him Francis in the framing story; by having others call him Francis in the story he tells, *he* calls himself that. In that story "Caligari" has Cesare murder the Town Clerk for his arrogance and inefficiency, for in his will to unlimited authority over others, "Caligari" cannot tolerate anyone else's limited authority over him. But in the expressionist hero Francis's will to unlimited freedom and self-expression, he himself cannot tolerate the small-mindedness of the bourgeoisie and its omnipresent bureaucracy. So, in the person of Cesare, he kills the Town Clerk. In the story, "Caligari" also has Cesare murder Alan for his naïveté and boyish enthusiasm. Alan is described by R. V. Adkinson in the script of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* as "a young man of aesthetic pursuits . . . [and] high ideals. He affects the style of the Nineties aesthete—a loosely-tied, flopping bow-tie and hair parted in the center in the style of Aubrey Beardsley" (44). If Alan is not Francis's double, as so described, then he is only a slightly exaggerated, or condensed, version. (The duplication of the "-an-" in Francis's name, in Alan's, and in Jane's, is thus not accidental.) When Cesare is stabbing Alan to death in the latter's room, moreover, we see *Francis's* shadow, not Cesare's, hovering over Alan. Francis thereby murders in Alan what he hates in himself.

Francis is, again, the consummate expressionist by Walter Sokel's account: "A deep conviction of unworthiness runs as a constant theme through the works of the expressionists. In fact, expressionism can be viewed as the attempt of a generation to come to grips with and somehow transcend the calamitous self-contempt that has overtaken the modern poet" (83). I add the following, also from Sokel, only because it seems particularly descriptive of Francis's confinement in an insane asylum in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and because it points to the peculiar absence of warmth and love from the world of the film, to the coldness and severity that are all it consists of: "The [expressionist] poet stands on the margin of life, longing to be in the center. But something in himself bars him from ever reaching it, from ever partaking of the world's warmth and love" (83).



## 2. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), dir. Robert Wiene

Here is Walter Sokel, again, on the expressionist in love: “His relation to the opposite sex reflects his general feeling of inferiority. If he is not altogether unable to gain a woman’s love, he is incapable of holding her affection for any length of time” (83). Francis does not love himself, and therefore he cannot expect the love of another in return. For much of the time in the two framing episodes, Francis “gazes wistfully at [Jane] and thinks that if she only condescended to love him she could redeem him . . .” (Sokel, 83). Through the agency of Cesare, Francis kills his double, Alan, who is also in love with Jane. Cesare himself dies of exhaustion from

his efforts to carry the prostrate Jane away. In his role as Francis's alter ego, he can do nothing at this point but collapse and, literally, roll out of the picture. Right after he does so, we see Francis looking through the window of "Caligari's" trailer at Cesare's own "double"—a dummy, made to look exactly like him, lying in the "cabinet" for all to see, in order to allay any suspicion that might fall on Cesare while he is off committing another murder. As the "real" Cesare collapses, Francis, eyeing this man's "double," is immediately disturbed, even though he cannot yet know of Cesare's death and thinks that it is in fact Cesare at whom he is staring. Thus what happens to his alter ego happens, *mutatis mutandis*, to Francis.

Alan and the Town Clerk are now dead, Cesare has abducted Jane, and Cesare himself is dead. The path of Francis's storytelling consciousness, of his "Ich" ("I," or the self), can lead in the end only to "Caligari." Jane tells Francis it was Cesare who almost killed her. Francis then reexamines the criminal who, the inept police are convinced, is the murderer of Alan and the Town Clerk. But Francis is as puzzled and disbelieving as he was when the suspect was first presented to him as the murderer—naturally enough, since he recognizes no aspect of himself in this bearded, gnarled individual. (Like Francis and Alan, Cesare is pale and gaunt: an aesthete by any other name, or in any other life.) Francis returns to "Caligari's" trailer, goes inside, and discovers that what he thought was Cesare lying in the "cabinet" asleep was really a dummy replacement. "Caligari," who has resisted Francis's attempts to enter the trailer, is now implicated, and runs away. As the "co-dramatizer," with Cesare, of Francis's murderous self, "Caligari" can only take the same escape route through expressionist landscape that Cesare took with Jane.

Francis follows him and, at one point, is made to appear in silhouette in the background as "Caligari" races through the foreground, as if to suggest that Francis is the consciousness responsible for this dark tale. "Caligari" returns to the insane asylum where he is Director. Only after the Director's books and notes on somnambulism are found does Francis convince the other doctors at the asylum that their boss has been assuming the role of Caligari on the side to carry out his investigations with Cesare. The body of the dead Cesare, found in the fields, is then returned to the asylum. (Significantly, Francis has not stood eye-to-eye with Cesare since the night the latter predicted Alan's death, at the fair.) "Caligari," confronted with the dead body of his other half, as it were, loses all control. He is exposed. After he is straitjacketed and locked inside a cell, we see Francis standing outside the huge door to the cell and appearing very bewildered. He is *very bewildered*, not overjoyed, because it is not so much "Caligari" he has succeeded in exposing as himself. That is why Francis must be straitjacketed in the same way as "Caligari" and returned to the very same cell, once his story ends and we are back in the "real" world of the insane asylum: he is Caligari, or rather Caligari is an extension of Francis's own being.



### 3. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), dir. Robert Wiene

So I go against the grain of most *Caligari* criticism in that I imagine the film less as Janowitz and Mayer's expressionistic exposure of "the madness inherent in authority," perverted by Robert Wiene, than as Wiene's own exposure, aided unwittingly by Janowitz and Mayer's original story, of *the madness, excess, and ultimately self-destruction inherent in expressionism itself*. This interpretation becomes more compelling once one considers that the film of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* was produced at a time when dramatic or theatrical expressionism was beginning to exhaust itself as an artistic movement, after coming of age in the wave of revolutionary excitement and avant-garde experiment that swept over Germany in the wake of World War I. Wiene uses Francis's insane murdering as a *device*, that is, to investigate expressionism. In no way, do I believe, is he attempting to equate, even remotely, the real Francis with the real-life expressionist artists.

Wiene gives this away in the final framing scene when he shows that his concern is not with the criminally insane Francis but with the vision he has been able to extract from Francis's mind. The hospital courtyard at the end of the film looks the same as it did during the previous expressionistic sequences: even though we have purportedly returned to "reality," perpendicular lines have not replaced oblique ones. The implication is that Francis is more the expressionist imprisoned by his own vision than the madman imprisoned for murder. In the final "frame," the Director at one moment appears to be the "Caligari" of Francis's story when he puts his spectacles on, and at another moment does not look like "Caligari" when

he takes them off. In other words, there is nothing expressionistic or not but that “vision” makes it so. Wiene is not suggesting, however, that the real Director of the insane asylum is Caligari-like in the power and authority he wields over human minds, for that would be facile.

The Director says, just before the film ends, “At last I understand the nature of his madness. He thinks I am that mystic Caligari. *Now I see how he can be brought back to sanity again*” (100, emphasis mine). This itself is facile—thinking that Francis can be cured so easily. (Cured of his expressionism? The expressionists were to plod on for six more years, until 1926.) Wiene pokes fun here at the facileness and ineptitude of the bourgeois mentality, perhaps the human mentality itself, in its search for simple answers to complex questions. (Recall the Director’s self-satisfied, foolishly smiling face staring out at the camera during the film’s final iris-out.) He manages to give a good, swift kick in the pants to the bourgeois power structure—along with bourgeois codes of “objective” representation—so detested by the expressionists at the same time as he burlesques or overthrows, in Francis’s story, the naïveté and extremism of much dramatic expressionism itself.

That naïveté and extremism are represented to an unparalleled degree by Janowitz and Mayer’s original story, taken alone: in it the virtuous Francis melodramatically exposes, almost single handedly, “the madness inherent in authority”; he crushes “Caligari,” and he himself escapes all harm (though he does suffer the loss of Alan and Jane). That is pure *silliness*, and perhaps Robert Wiene’s real achievement in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is to have laid bare less the madness than the silliness, the dead end, inherent in authority, in *formulation*, of any kind—be it political, social, or artistic, be it in support of the military-industrial complex spawned by Euro-American capitalism or the dictatorship of the proletariat promulgated, for one, by the Spartacus League (the Marxist revolutionary movement organized in Germany during World War I). Wiene thus did something on film that the expressionists were rarely, if ever, able to do on stage: criticize, or laugh at, themselves at the same time as they scored their thematic points, through the projection of their subjective feelings concerning the mechanized, rationalized world of objective reality.

Tellingly, the expressionist experiment in the cinema largely ceased with the advent of sound, for the aesthetic situation in films was now too much like that of the theater, where the word was primary. The word ultimately destroyed dramatic expressionism—a style that began in painting around 1905 (before being taken up in music, architecture, literature, theater, and finally cinema), in reaction to the pervasive naturalism of late-nineteenth-century art—because within the form, or on the stage, it tended to lack variety, subtlety, and ambiguity: *richness*. The word destroyed cinematic expressionism because characters talking aloud, amid painted sets and artful lighting, were somehow even less real, or less imaginatively unreal, than before, to the point of being ridiculous.



After the end of economic inflation in 1924, German social reality stabilized and films—especially with the introduction of sound in 1928—sought to be realistic, objective, documentary-like, in accordance with the cool, sober “New Objectivity” in painting, photography, and literature. (Notable exceptions were the last two major expressionist films, F. W. Murnau’s *Faust* and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, both from 1926, and both almost desperately excessive in their production values.) There was nowhere to go, then, from the criticisms of Robert Wiene. He meant, I think, to enrich or improve upon expressionism with *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Instead, though he made three more quasi-expressionist films in *Genuine* (1920), *Raskolnikow* (1923), and *The Hands of Orlac* (1924), Wiene has come to represent the final word on this unique artistic style.

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## D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East*

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Among the films of D. W. Griffith (1875-1948), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916) are the most famous (or infamous in the case of the former picture) and, justly, the most praised for their technical accomplishments. Lower in this group is the status of *Way Down East* (1920), but it is a picture of persistent strength and of exceptional interest in American cultural history. *Way Down East* was made from a highly successful stage play of the same name, written by Lottie Blair Parker, Joseph R. Grismer, and William A. Brady, which had its premiere at Newport, Rhode Island, on September 3, 1897, and was performed around the United States for more than twenty years. The Parker-Grismer-Brady play came at the end of a century in which the form of melodrama had dominated the American theater—so much so that it spawned several types, such as the rural or “horse-and-buggy” melodrama of *Way Down East*.

Some remarks on nineteenth-century American drama are necessary for context. Serious American drama at this time, at its most ambitious, reached the level of blank-verse, pseudo-Shakespearean tragedy along the lines of George Henry Boker's *Francesca da Rimini* (1855) or large-scale costume melodrama filled with spectacle, like Steele MacKaye's *Paul Kauver* (1887). At its less ambitious, it produced broader melodrama of the cheer-the-hero-hiss-the-villain kind, like *Way Down East* and George Aiken's enormously popular dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Much of American comic drama, for its part, was built on variants of the situation established in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787): the triumph of a supposedly uncivilized American (or Westerner, or Yankee farmer) over sophisticated Englishmen (or Easterners, or city slickers). Among the many plays of this type were Samuel Woodworth's *The Forest Rose* (1825) and J. K. Paulding's *The Lion of the West* (1830).

In the nineteenth century the theater had become a broadly popular light-entertainment form, then, much like television today. It is possible to do artistically ambitious work on American commercial television, but television is not likely to be the first medium to come to the mind of a serious writer—just as the theater was not for the serious writer of the nineteenth century. This is not to say that the American playwrights of this period were without talent, but that, like television writers, they were more likely to be artisans skilled at producing the entertaining effects that audiences wanted, rather than artists looking to illuminate the human condition or challenge received values. The reasons for this general absence of literary depth or quality were many and not restricted to America, for in Britain and on the European continent the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also generally fallow periods



for dramatic literature. (In America, as in Europe, a change in the kind of literature being written for the theater began to become apparent in the last years of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth, as Ibsen in Norway, Chekhov in Russia, and later Shaw in England and O'Neill in the United States rediscovered the theater as a vehicle amenable to ambitious dramatic literature—be it tragic or comic, realistic, naturalistic, expressionist, or symbolist.)

Since the genre of melodrama dominated the nineteenth-century theater, we need to ask now what in fact a melodrama is. The term has often been defined—it is one of the easier dramatic terms to define—but for my purposes I will try to consolidate the definitions offered by the theater scholar Robert B. Heilman, the film historian Ben Singer, and the film critic Linda Williams. Melodrama is a dramatic form using monochromatic characters, relying heavily on sensationalism and sentimentality, or spectacle and pathos (themselves underscored by suspenseful or saccharine musical accompaniment), and usually involving physical danger to the “good” or virtuous protagonist, who is engaged in an external conflict with evil—vice—of one kind or another. According to James Mercer and Martin Shingler, melodrama “always has the ability to provoke strong emotions in audiences, from tears of sorrow and identification, to derisive laughter” (1). The single essential ingredient in this recipe, finally, is earthly justice. A “straight” drama may merely imply justice or may end in irony at the absence of it; in tragedy, justice, if it comes at all, may come in the hereafter (if it comes at all). In melodrama, by contrast, justice may be slow but it is sure, and it is always seen to be done—often in a last-minute reversal of the situation at the play’s core.

By implication, then, melodrama is an artistic strategy designed, *and desired*, to reconcile its audience to the way things are. In the nineteenth century its chief aim was to support the economic and moral system—a great deal was made in these plays of the “poor but honest” theme together with its companion, the “rich but exploitative” motif. (Today, melodrama supports different conventional ideas, as in the case of David Mamet’s movie *House of Games* [1987] if not the much earlier film of Lillian Hellman’s *The Little Foxes* [dir. William Wyler, 1941], which takes place at the same time as *Way Down East* but emphasizes almost exclusively the rapaciousness or acquisitiveness of the “haves.”) Many thousands of farmers saw the play *Way Down East* in the years that it toured the country, and they must have known that this idyllic, Currier-and-Ives version of their lives was a long way from brute fact. Indeed, as David Mayer points out (198), the common source for both play and film of *Way Down East*—and for numerous other American rural melodramas—was a wildly popular lithograph which had enjoyed a long life as the quintessential

image of domestic serenity and stability: *The Old Oaken Bucket*, created for Currier and Ives in 1864, and “realized” in our first view in Griffith’s *Way Down East* of the Bartlett farm, seen in long shot as well as in subsequent closer shots that reprise details from the print. But this fictional, pictorial or cinematic image gave farmers two compensations: escape from the harshness and unpredictability of agricultural reality, and roles in which to imagine themselves outside the theater. As Eric Bentley once put it, “Melodrama is the Naturalism of the dream life” (205).

Nowadays it may be necessary to explain the title of this play/film. “Down East” is an old phrase used to describe the farthest reaches of New England, particularly Maine, which at its tip is considerably east of Boston. The picture tells the entire story chronologically of innocent Anna Moore (including the portion that occurs before the play and is revealed there only through exposition), who lives with her mother “way down east” in the New England village of Belden. When they get into financial difficulties, the country girl goes, at her mother’s request, to seek help from their rich and fashionable relatives in Boston, the Tremonts. Mrs. Tremont and her snobbish daughters treat her poorly, but Anna attracts the attention of an unscrupulous playboy named Lennox Sanderson. He has his way by tricking her into a false marriage, which he persuades her to keep secret on the ground that the revelation would anger his father (from whom he derives his support). Back home in her Maine village, Anna obeys until she becomes pregnant, at which time she asks to be publicly recognized as Mrs. Sanderson. The womanizer responds by telling her the truth and then leaving her to cope as best she can.

Some time later, Anna’s mother dies, and Anna takes refuge in a rooming house in Belden, where her baby dies soon after its birth. Turned out by her censorious landlady, who suspects that she has no husband, Anna pitifully takes to the road with her few possessions to look for work. She finds a position at the Bartlett farm, near Bartlett village, despite the reservations of Squire Bartlett about hiring someone whose past he and his family do not know. Anna proves her virtue through hard work (how else?), and the squire’s son, David, falls in love with her. But when he declares himself, she tells him, without disclosing the reason, that nothing will ever be possible between them. As coincidence would have it (*has* to have it), the “reason”—Lennox Sanderson—lives nearby on a country estate. He soon discovers that Anna is on the Bartlett place and urges her to move on; she tries to obey what the society of her time would have perceived as a male superior, but the Bartletts, who know nothing of the Sanderson matter (though they know him), persuade their “hired girl” to remain.



#### 4. *Way Down East* (1920), dir. D. W. Griffith

The plot begins building to its crisis when, some months later, Maria Poole, the Belden landlady, visits Bartlett Village, sees Anna, and tells her story to the local gossip, Martha Perkins (who, along with a “village eccentric,” a “nutty professor,” and a “high-spirited gal,” forms a kind of gallery of stock comic roles from the nineteenth-century theater). After Martha relays the news to the squire, he goes to Belden to confirm it; when he learns that the story is true, he returns home that night and orders Anna out of his house during a blinding snowstorm. She leaves, but not before denouncing Sanderson, who that very evening is an honored guest at the Bartlett house. Sanderson is thereupon attacked by David Bartlett and shown the door; then David goes out into the storm to find Anna. Hysterical and grief-stricken, she has collapsed on a frozen river just as the ice is beginning to break up in the spring thaw. When David finds her, Anna is being carried downstream on an ice cake toward the falls; yet he manages to follow her from floe to floe and complete his rescue right before she reaches the brink. Himself forgiving, the Squire now begs Anna’s forgiveness as well, which she graciously grants; Sanderson offers to marry her authentically but is scornfully refused; and the film of *Way Down East* ends happily with the wedding of David and Anna.

Following Bernard Beckerman’s lead (171) and distinguishing between “plot,” which conventionally signifies the sequence of actions or events in a play, and “story,” which designates all incidents and activities that occur before, after, *and* during the play—offstage as well as on stage—I should presently like to examine Griffith’s adaptation of dramatic techniques to film and to consider his reasons for telling Anna Moore’s story chronologically or episodically as

opposed to climactically. Although it is true that much has been written about *Way Down East's* translation into film, that writing—by Michael Allen, Robert M. Henderson, David Mayer, and Richard Schickel, among others—focuses on the source material or is concerned with the separate roles of Griffith, Parker, Grismer, Brady, and others in its adaptation, not with the finished cinematic product itself. Indeed, Scott Simmon's *The Films of D. W. Griffith* does not even include a chapter on *Way Down East*, or for that matter any extended discussion of the film, while (astonishingly) Tom Gunning's *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film* makes no mention of this work whatsoever. My purpose here, by contrast, is to concentrate on Griffith's film adaptation *as adaptation*: its cinematic form, style, aims, and strategies.

The screenplay that Griffith used, the majority of which he himself wrote, is a model of the film adaptation of plays, in the purely technical sense. Much of the formal beauty of play design, as he surely knew, arises from limitation: the necessity to limit action and to arrange necessary combinations of characters on the stage. The skill with which these matters are handled can be a pleasure in itself, as well as positive enrichment of the drama. But this skill is not essential to the screenplay, which has infinitely greater freedom of physical and temporal movement, can unfold intertwined material into serial form, and can run virtually parallel actions. The contrast can easily be seen if the Parker-Grismer-Brady play script and the movie scenario by Griffith and Anthony Paul Kelly are placed alongside each other.

That movie scenario, it must be remembered, was written during the silent era. (Though "silent," the films of this era did make heavy use of live music during their projection—especially movie melodramas ["melodious" dramas] like *Way Down East*—the same kind of live music that accompanied the original play in the theater, and which was incorporated by Griffith into the soundtrack of the 1931 reissue of the movie.) That is, even if the director had wanted simply to film the play as it stood, he would have been unable to do so without the heavy use of titles. This is because Anna's past is revealed through dialogue in the play, which has a late point of attack and therefore begins when she arrives at Bartlett Village in Maine looking for work—after her baby has died and she has been evicted from Maria Poole's rooming house. It is Lennox Sanderson's discovery of Anna on Squire Bartlett's farm, then, that provokes the drama of the Parker-Grismer-Brady play. Griffith, however, must tell Anna's story long before this occurrence: through pictures (and the discreet use of titles), and beginning with this country girl's visit to Boston.

Beyond the merely descriptive or illustrative images of his narrative, Griffith uses nature to evoke characters' inner states where a drama would use, for instance, the soliloquy; he also uses nature as a silent but expressive character. An example

of the latter “use” occurs when Anna is thrown out by her landlady, after her baby’s death: there is a lovely long shot of Anna starting down a country road, her few possessions in a box under her arm, and this shot bitterly contrasts the beauty of the countryside with this young woman’s sorry state. Indeed, the environment underlines Anna’s desolation by seeming to overwhelm her—a tiny figure by contrast who becomes even smaller as she walks away from the camera. Shots of nature are used differently, to endorse a character’s feelings, in at least two instances in *Way Down East*. In one, Anna meets with David Bartlett near a waterfall that pours into a gleaming, tranquil river, which reflects the couple’s contentment even as the cascade represents the passion surging inside them. Similarly, during the storm sequence there is a powerful congruence between the raging blizzard and Anna’s turbulent feelings as she wanders all alone at night.

There is plenty of suspense by the time we get to the snowstorm, but what about early in the film? The sources of tension in the play *Way Down East* are the gradual revelation of Anna’s certain secret and the definition of her relationship with Lennox Sanderson. But these tensions disappear in the movie because we follow Anna from her very first meeting with Sanderson, after she has arrived in Boston from rural Maine to visit her wealthy aunt. (One big advantage of the film’s method, though, is that Griffith can give Anna the experience of betrayal and loss of her child “onstage,” thus making her a differently seen, more sympathetic character by the time she reaches the point of what was her first entrance in the play.) Perhaps believing that an equivalent of dramatic suspense would be necessary to hold the audience’s interest in his chronological tale of Anna’s ordeal, Griffith creates tension in the first half of the film, before his heroine leaves Boston, through *visual* means in addition to creating literal visual tension.

The first type is produced when, several times, a scene from life on Squire Bartlett’s farm is inserted into or intercut with the action in Boston. Griffith knew he had the problem of establishing the Bartlett home and his male romantic lead before Anna reaches them—about half an hour into the story. (In the play of *Way Down East*, the reverse is true: Anna does not arrive at the Bartlett farm until fairly late in the first act, most of which is spent introducing David Bartlett and his parents as well as some local types.) So he solved the problem with a device deliberately borrowed from the Dickensian novel: he inserts the title “Chapter Two . . . Bartlett Village” and proceeds to give us glimpses of the place and its most prominent family. We do not know that this is where Anna will eventually seek refuge and find salvation through David, but we assume that the director is showing us these scenes for a purpose that will become clear. In fact, the lack of clarity is itself an enticement, and we eagerly anticipate an explanation of the presence of the Bartletts and their farm in the movie.



### 5. *Way Down East* (1920), dir. D. W. Griffith

Literal visual tension is created in the film of *Way Down East* in two ways. Life in the sophisticated city, in Boston, is filled with verticals—tall doorways, spiral staircases, high ceilings—whereas life in simple, bucolic Maine, in the inserted country scenes, is composed mainly of horizontals—the long porch of the Bartlett family house, the flat land, the background action that crosses the screen from right to left (as when the sheriff drives his horse-drawn wagon up to the farm's gated entrance). In addition to this horizontal-vertical juxtaposition, there is the larger, even more striking one of outdoors against indoors. Almost all the shots of the country in the first half of *Way Down East* take place outside, in the fresh air and sunlight. By contrast, all the shots of the city occur indoors, in darkened, smoke-filled rooms. The atmosphere in Boston is frenetic: there seemingly are round-the-clock parties. The inhabitants of Bartlett village, for their part, are so relaxed that some of them even fall asleep during the day. (This may explain the otherwise curious shot of David in bed on a sunny afternoon, starting suddenly from sleep only when Anna, as yet unknown to him, is entering into the bogus marriage with Sanderson miles away.)



With the aid of such visual tension, Griffith could film the whole of Anna's story, as opposed to solely the plot of the play, and doing that gave him one large advantage: he could make it appear less melodramatic, or, better, he could enhance the *realism* of the melodrama, of its settings and actions—a realism of spectacle toward which the nineteenth-century theater itself had aspired, to a point. (Stage productions of *Way Down East*, for example, placed onstage a sleigh-riding episode, a traveling scene by wagon through the forest to the Bartlett farm, and a "circus" of horses, sheep, and all varieties of agricultural conveyance.) As Ben Singer has argued,

It might appear incongruous that melodrama around the turn of the century was often referred to as "the realistic class of plays." This phrase points to the fact that melodrama immediately conjured up the aspiration toward spectacular diegetic realism. That kind of realism, for which A. Nicholas Vardac proposed the term "Romantic realism," aimed at credible accuracy in the depiction of incredible, extraordinary views. . . . Sensational melodrama was preoccupied with diegetic realism in general, which involved both efforts at verisimilar *mise-en-scène* and the use of real objects on stage—real horses, real fire engines, real pile drivers, real water, etc. (50)

Thus one of the distinguishing qualities of the film of *Way Down East*, perhaps the most significant factor in permitting it to transcend the limits of its primitive genre, derives from its careful rooting of the characters in their environment. This was a quality that no amount of stage machinery could produce, and it may even be that *Way Down East* represents the culmination of the process, stretching back almost to the beginning of the movies, by which film, possessing a superior technology, finally revealed its theatrical rival obsolete: the triumph of optics over mechanics, let us call it.

Clearly, then, Anna is enmeshed in Manichean circumstances in the movie, but, just as clearly, she passes through them—all of them—and *we see her do so*. Although she is victimized by Sanderson on account of her rustic innocence, Anna struggles to make her own destiny: she endures the disgrace (at the time) of giving birth out of wedlock and the grief of her baby's death; then she creates a new life for herself through hard work at Squire Bartlett's farm. Circumstance intervenes again in the persons of her erstwhile seducer and of her former landlady, who, with Martha Perkins' aid, betrays Anna's past to the squire. And again Anna fights against her victimization: she rightly accuses Sanderson of gross deception in front of his neighbors, then defiantly walks out of the farmhouse into the blizzard to end all blizzards.

Because we witnessed Anna's strength and bravery after she was deserted

by Sanderson and were not simply told about them, we find those qualities in her here at the end more believable. Because we witnessed Anna's journey from the Maine countryside to Boston, then from there back to Maine and on to Squire Bartlett's farm, we are more willing to view her final foray into the snow as possible escape rather than probable death. In the play of *Way Down East*, we only hear of Anna's incredible rescue; in the film, we see it happen, seemingly without gimmick, and her rescue thus becomes credible. After this, her forgiveness by Squire Bartlett (because she was tricked into immorality) and marriage to David can be only anticlimax, whereas, in the play, they are meant to be epiphany.

I do not mean to imply that Griffith increases the literary value of the Parker-Grismer-Brady script by expanding it in time and space. *Way Down East* is still a melodrama. What he accomplishes, however, in adapting the play to the screen is to point up significant differences between the two forms—the obvious ones and the not so obvious. One obvious difference—made so partly because of Griffith's pioneering work—is not only that the theater is more verbal and the cinema more visual, but also that film is a narrative art form that tells stories through the mediation of the camera, which can provide the viewer with multiple perspectives through a variety of shots. It was Griffith who discovered that the content of a scene—the intensity of its drama and the degree of its emotion—not its location, should determine the correct placement (including angle) of the camera and the correct moment to cut from one perspective to another. He made shots such as the full shot, the medium shot, the close-up, and the long shot standard and combined them into sequential wholes to produce narrative clarity, power, and meaning. Furthermore, Griffith discovered at the same time the power of two moving-camera shots: the pan and the traveling shot, each of which produces a magnified sensation of physical movement; the usefulness of the technique called parallel editing or cross-cutting, which could show the relationship between two or more independent actions; and he discovered the subtlety of tonal lighting, which, together with his use of natural light sources, replaced the flat stage lighting that emphasized the painted scenery of other directors' films.

The remarkable fusion of these new film elements and old theater heritage is why *Way Down East* is still effective today and why it is historically important. In a word, we see Griffith using sheerly cinematic language to fulfill the drama of his script. As Anna stands before the Tremonts' towering double doors in Boston, for example, she is photographed in a diminishing high-angle shot. When Lennox Sanderson is later introduced, there is a quick succession of cuts (close-ups and medium shots), so that his first appearance sparkles prismatically—and dangerously. When he and Anna meet, we see him over her



shoulder before we see them together, as Griffith uses film's power to shift the audience and thus increase the feeling of encounter between these two. As the camera comes in for close-ups of Anna and her baby's birth-and-death room, Griffith vignettes her against a black background to underscore the icon effect. As she arrives at the Bartlett gate on foot not long afterwards, he intercuts a shot of Sanderson on horseback, at his estate nearby, thereby commenting sardonically and simultaneously knitting his plot. When the spinster Martha Perkins discovers the facts of Anna's past and hurries to spread the gossip, we get one of the few tracking shots in *Way Down East*: the camera trundles eagerly ahead of her on the snowy path, and its very motion—Martha's motion toward the Bartlett home—becomes part of the idea of the scene.

But *Way Down East* does more than fuse the “grammar and rhetoric” of film with the vocabulary of theater in this way. It also points out the difference in artistic structure and philosophical assumption between the drama and the cinema. The paradigm of dramatic structure in the West up to Ibsen in the late nineteenth century, with the exception of Shakespeare and his coevals, had been intensive or Aristotelian—a form in which, philosophically speaking, the protagonist is caught in a highly contracted situation, his end foretold before the plot begins and his range of choice therefore increasingly reduced, for the plot in this case is enmeshed in the toils of a story with a long as well as a weighty past. Film form is by its very nature *extensive*, for the camera can easily extend itself over time and space as it covers the whole of the story, in this way militating against highly compressed circumstances and always leaving possibilities or alternatives open for the characters, insofar as action is concerned. (Shakespeare's plays are often called “cinematic” precisely because their own structure is extensive.)

In adapting *Way Down East* to film, Griffith essentially dropped the intensive structure in which Anna Moore had been trapped (only to be miraculously-cum-melodramatically rescued from it at the last minute by David Bartlett) into an extensive one, with favorable or liberating results for the melodrama as well as for the character of Anna. What Griffith seems to have been discovering, along with his audience, was that film not only satisfies a craving for the replication or redemption of physical reality, but also for freedom—from the restrictions of time and place, from the limitations of language, and *from the past*. Action in film is thus more of a journey in the present than a confrontation based on the past—the one filled with possibility or promise, the other with fatalism or foreboding. And if stage melodrama, in which villainy is punished and virtue rewarded, was a last-second escape from the past, melodramatic film is an extended departure from it.



### 6. *Way Down East* (1920), dir. D. W. Griffith

As Frank Rahill, David Grimsted, and James Smith all make clear, stage melodrama provided its audiences in the nineteenth century with momentary relief from a world in which man felt himself a prisoner of his past, possibly of his own origins, and where justice was most often *not* done. The myth of such melodrama was that of spiritual redemption by bourgeois standards. Hence Anna is a secular saint, truly good, suffering for the sins and blindness of her fellows, finally undergoing an agony that reveals her purity. She is betrayed in her trust, she goes through travail, she labors in humility, she declines the happiness of David's love because she is unworthy, and she shows that death holds no terror for her. At last she achieves, with David, a kind of heaven on earth—one that is shared, moreover, by two other couples from the film's comic subplot, which had served merely as comic relief but now joins the main plot in the finale's happy, harmonious union.

To extend the analogy, the God in the story is the Squire—the owner of the Eden. It is he who at first is about to expel Anna from the Garden, who finds the largesse in his heart to let her remain on trust, and who at last provides the crucial forgiveness—because when she sinned, she did not know it; she thought she was behaving rightly. Not only is Anna forgiven, but when she marries David she wears white, her virginity restored by dispensation of the Squire. Here then, in capsule, is sainthood founded on respectability, which was possibly the chief criterion for social survival in the nineteenth century.

But not in the twentieth, and certainly not the twenty-first century. Yet Griffith appears to have had a sense of the continuing function of melodrama in a bourgeois, mock-egalitarian society. He also must have had some sense of the pluralistic nature of the public at any given time, the perception that new, even

avant-garde, interests can coexist with old, traditional ones. (For instance, I do not think he would have been surprised that, during the 1969–1970 movie season, *Easy Rider* and *Airport* were successes simultaneously.) So in 1920, the same year that O'Neill wrote *Beyond the Horizon*, in which Stravinsky and Satie were already known composers, when Picasso and Matisse themselves were known painters, and two years after the end of a world war that had altered certain traditions and beliefs forever, Griffith paid \$182,000—much more than the entire cost of his *Birth of a Nation*—for the screen rights to a twenty-three-year-old rural melodrama.

Before making his first of many short films in 1908, Griffith himself had had plenty of experience in the theater, a theater that was full of plays like the one by Parker, Grismer, and Brady: he had begun acting in 1897 (the same year, to repeat, in which *Way Down East* was first produced on stage), at the age of twenty-two, with a stock company in his native Kentucky, had struggled in a number of other stock and road companies, then had written a melodrama that was produced, unsuccessfully, in Washington, D.C., in 1907. Out of this experience, evidently, came the conviction that he knew how to make *Way Down East* “work” and that the postwar public had not shed all its old affinities. And apparently he also understood how film was taking over the form and function of melodrama from the theater, expanding it in the directions toward which it had been moving.

One of those directions included the theater's wishful embrace of cinematic form, not only because of that form's photographic realism, but also because, by its very (expansive) nature, film reflected for melodramatically conditioned spectators in the early twentieth century the belief that the world was a place in which man could leave the past behind and create his own future, where earthly justice for past wrongs would become a moot point—to be left in the past. *Way Down East*, then, represents a landmark in the transition between two worlds: of an intensive play structure and an extensive cinematic one, of Aristotelian drama and Eisensteinian film, of nineteenth-century theater culture and twentieth-century movie entertainment. It is as if, in shooting *Way Down East* after the seminal *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance* and late in the historical process that saw film make over theatrical melodrama, Griffith were going back to mark simultaneously his own beginnings on the nineteenth-century stage and his movement into cinema in 1908, when, out of theater work, he took a job with the Biograph Company of New York—one that would eventually enable him to make film history.

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## Charles Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*

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When Charles Chaplin made *The Gold Rush* in 1925, he was thirty-six years old. He had been a world-famous star for about ten years—indeed, he was the twentieth century's first international media superstar, the world's most recognizable figure of *any* sort (Charlot in France, Small Mustache in China). Trotsky said of Céline that he “walked into great literature as other men walk into their homes” (191). The same figure applies to Chaplin and great cinema. The rising young music-hall performer met the film medium as if it had been created for him, and he met the film public as if it had been waiting for him.

Why? Because Chaplin did something to movies that had eluded Mack Sennett, who came before him. No one prior to Sennett had so forcefully revealed the comic effects of motion, of human bodies and machines and inanimate objects, hurtling across the screen and colliding. But Sennett's rapid, pure-motion principle bothered Chaplin, who wanted to add character and individuality to the former's gymnastics. For Sennett, the comic world was a realm of silly surfaces; for Chaplin, the comic world provided the means to examine the serious world (underneath) of human needs and societal structures. For Sennett, comedy was an end; for Chaplin, it was a means. Before Chaplin, that is, no one had demonstrated that physical comedy could be simultaneously hilariously funny, emotionally passionate, and pointedly intellectual.

Chaplin also did something filmically different from D. W. Griffith, who likewise came before him. Whereas Griffith combined the devices of cinema into a coherent narrative medium, Chaplin advanced the art by making all consciousness of the medium disappear so completely that the audience concentrates on the photographic subject rather than the filmic process. Chaplin's insistence on unobtrusive, middle-distance composition and restrained, seamless editing thus sustains the spell of his performance by producing his hypnotic magic without sleight-of-hand. And while his cinematic technique tended to be invisible—emphasizing the actor and his actions—he gradually evolved a principle of cinema based on framing: finding the exact way to frame a shot so as to reveal its meaning and motion without the necessity of making a disturbing cut. For this reason, Chaplin's films are interesting not for their form but for their *content*—specifically, for his brilliant characterization, through the exquisite art of mime, of the little tramp who is totally at odds with the world around him. It was Chaplin's *presence* in his pictures, then, rather than anything in their formal make-up, that made them interesting, distinguished, and finally important. Put another way, what's vital to Chaplin's art is what he does *on* film rather than what he does *with* it.

Up to 1920 Chaplin had made about seventy films, most of them short and most directed by himself. Only one of them, *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), was feature-length, and it was directed by Sennett. In 1921 Chaplin directed his first

feature, *The Kid*, with Jackie Coogan and himself as the Tramp. His next feature, *A Woman of Paris* (1923)—in which he appears only briefly as a station porter—was not a comedy and was a flop. *The Gold Rush* was only Chaplin's second long film about the Tramp; yet he already knew he was dealing with a character who was familiar to everyone, Eskimos and Malaysians included. It's rather as if an author had created a world-renowned character through short stories, had written one novel about him, very successfully, and now wanted to take that character further and deeper in a second long work.

Chaplin recounts in his autobiography how he struggled to find an idea for that second feature, insisting to himself: "The next film must be an epic! The greatest!" Nothing came.

Then one Sunday morning, while spending the weekend at the Fairbankses' [Beverly Hills home], I sat with Douglas after breakfast, looking at stereoscopic views. Some were of Alaska and the Klondike; one a view of the Chilkoot Pass, with a long line of prospectors climbing up over frozen mountains. . . . Immediately ideas and comedy business began to develop, and, although I had no story, the image of one began to grow. (299-300)

The role of the unconscious in creation is still unfathomed, and we can only hypothesize from results. In Chaplin's reaction to those photos, the striking element is unpredictability. Since the first appearance of the Tramp in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* in 1914, he had made very few films that took this character out of contemporary city or country life, that inserted the Tramp, that is, into a historical context—1918's *Shoulder Arms* comes to mind, if not 1917's *The Immigrant*. Tramps are, after all, a by-product of industry, urban or rural. Evidently (we can deduce after the event) Chaplin's unconscious saw at once, in those stereoscopic pictures, the advantages of the novelty of putting the Tramp into a context that, so to speak, had no direct relation to Tramp-dom, as well as the possibilities for the "epic" that he was seeking. And, presumably, he saw the power in putting the image of the Tramp, whose black moustache is the center of the figure's color gradations, against predominantly white backgrounds. All in all, it was a chance to simultaneously vary and heighten what he had done with the Tramp up to now.

*The Gold Rush* is unique among Chaplin's silent-era films in that he began production with a more or less complete story. (His working methods only fully came to light posthumously, as a result of the outtakes collected and analyzed by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill for their 1983 television mini-series *Unknown Chaplin*. Chaplin, singularly, was able to use the studio as his sketch pad, beginning vaguely with an image and then filming, retaking, undoing, and revising as a story gradually began to take shape, resulting in such extraordinary shooting ratios as *The Kid*'s 53 to 1.) Chaplin had intended to shoot all of the exteriors on location



in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, near Truckee, California, but instead much of the picture was filmed on elaborate sets—made from wood, burlap, chicken wire, plaster, salt, and flour—in his studio on the southeast corner of La Brea and Sunset in Hollywood. Production covered seventeen months, from the spring of 1924 to the summer of 1925.

Years later Chaplin told Jean Cocteau that the plot of *The Gold Rush* had grown “like a tree” (*Diaries*, 11 April 1953). Well, it is a remarkably ramified tree, a remarkably complex plot for a film that runs less than ninety minutes—eighty-two, to be exact. The story is a stew of elements drawn from dime novels, Jack London, and nineteenth-century blood-and-thunder melodrama, conventions that at the time of the picture’s release were as familiar to audiences as their own homes. By 1925, the Klondike itself had entered the realm of romantic adventure, even though it still lay within living memory. As ever, the Tramp is the little man in a world populated by giants, kin to Till Eulenspiegel, Schweik, Josef K., Happy Hooligan, and Popeye—the audience’s surrogate, in other words, amid the confusion of the early twentieth century, before the tide turned toward supermen around the time of World War II.

Here, in brief, is the plot of *The Gold Rush*: Charlie, a prospector in the Alaskan gold rush of 1898, takes refuge from a storm in a lonely, snowbound cabin with another prospector, Big Jim McKay, who has literally been blown in there after making a gold strike. They spend some days of hunger together, after which they go their separate ways. Big Jim then finds a man trying to jump his claim and, in a struggle, is knocked out. He wakes up without any memory of his claim’s location.

Charlie, meanwhile, has arrived in a boomtown, has found a job as caretaker of a cabin, and has fallen in love with Georgia, a dance-hall girl. She treats him lightly, since she is in love with a strapping young prospector, until she accidentally discovers how truly smitten the Tramp is. Before Charlie can pursue his love, however, Big Jim wanders into town, still amnesiac about his claim, and seizes Charlie as the sole means of guiding him back to the lonely cabin and thus the gold. He promises Charlie half the proceeds and drags him off.

They find the cabin and spend the night there, during which the cabin is blown to the edge of a cliff near the claim. (This is a reversal of the earlier device in which Big Jim was blown from the claim to the cabin.) In the morning the two prospectors escape from the cabin just before it slips over the edge—to find themselves right on the site of the gold.

In an epilogue, Charlie and Big Jim, swathed in furs, are on board a ship returning to the United States. (The Tramp sports two fur coats, one atop the other, and one senses that this is less a matter of mere luxury than of banishing cold, including the cold of his immediate past.) For newspaper photos, Charlie



puts on his carefully preserved Tramp outfit—and runs into Georgia. She thinks he is still really the Tramp, hides him from the ship's officers who are searching for a stowaway, and offers to pay his fare when they find him. The truth is subsequently revealed about the new millionaire, and Charlie and Georgia are united at the close.

*The Gold Rush* thus takes the Tramp, in his longest outing to date, from rags to riches, combining the pleasure of laughing at his pratfalls with that of vicariously sharing in his eventual good fortune—and what could have more universal appeal? The Tramp—small, innocent, beleaguered, romantic, oblivious, generous, resourceful, courageous, dignified, idealistic—lives inside everyone, but Chaplin made him manifest, with humor that is never cruel, never aggressive, and always speaks to our best selves. Here as elsewhere, the jokes build on situations with which everyone can identify—and quickly raise the stakes. Who doesn't feel an empathetic blush when Charlie's pants start to fall down as he dances with the girl of his dreams? Or breathe a sigh of relief when he finds a convenient rope and manages to slip it around his waist without her noticing? It takes only a beat, however, for everyone to see that a large, hapless dog is tied to the end of that rope and is being swung around the dance floor. And then everyone involuntarily braces for Charlie's inevitable tumble. The sequence occupies only a minute, but in that time, the audience has experienced with near physical intensity a fall, a rise, and another fall—with a wildly unexpected gag planted right in the middle. That combination is Chaplin's basic comedic formula, the DNA of his pictures, and it may be at its best here.

*The Gold Rush*, then, was the comic epic that Chaplin was looking for. But it was epic in a thematic sense as well as a spatial or geographic one. For, in an instance of aesthetic telescoping, Chaplin pointedly chose to make a movie about a late-nineteenth-century gold rush in the middle of the madly moneymaking 1920s. In doing so, he more or less announced his theme, which is the film's consistent indictment of what the pursuit of the material does to the human animal: it makes him an *inhuman* animal. Charlie, the least materialistic of men, has come to the most brazenly materialistic of places, a place where life is hard, dangerous, brutal, uncomfortable, and unkind. The quest for gold perverts nearly all human relationships in *The Gold Rush*, which ever endeavors seriocomically to contrast material and spiritual pursuits, the merely physical or corporeal with the sublimely soulful.

The start of the film strikes Chaplin's usual serious opening note, like the adagio opening measures of a Haydn symphony before the brightness; but Chaplin returns frequently to seriousness in *The Gold Rush*, something that has always dismayed a few and delighted many. Those first shots are of a long, serpentine line of gold prospectors filing up the snow-filled Chilkoot Pass and are obviously

inspired by some of the pictures that Fairbanks showed Chaplin on that Sunday morning. (There have been other films set in the Klondike, but they came after Chaplin's: two examples are Clarence Brown's silent drama *The Trail of '98* [1928] and the sound comedy *Klondike Annie* [1936], starring Mae West.) The Chilkoot Pass sequence is grim; we even see one of the prospectors collapse in the snow while the others trudge heedlessly past him.

Then a title announces "A Lone Prospector," and we see a narrow mountain path on the edge of a steep drop. I always laugh at once at this sight, not just because I know Chaplin is coming *and* the path is dangerous, but also because—separated from the opening only by one title—the scenery is so patently phony compared with the reality of the Pass. Thus, early in the film, Chaplin sets a pattern that weaves throughout: the real world posed against the theater of that world, unblinking reality as the ground for a comic abstract of that reality. It is dangerous to mix modes in this way, of course, unless one is able, as Chaplin is, to make the return to each mode instantly credible and supportive of the other.

Then in the Tramp comes, dancing along with a little pack on his back, with attached pickaxe and frying pan; he wears no overcoat or scarf in freezing weather, only gloves. This first sequence shows the touch that made Chaplin great. As he skips and skids along the narrow path, a gigantic bear appears behind him and follows him. A lesser comic would have turned and seen the bear, and possibly would have got a lot of laughs out of his panic on the slippery path. But the bear disappears into a cave just before Charlie stops to turn around and see how far he come so far. *We* know the danger he has escaped, he doesn't. This is not only funnier, it is also serious, for it exemplifies two of the Tramp's most important qualities: his innocence and his unwitting faith in the power of that innocence.

Later, when the Tramp and Big Jim are trapped and starving in the cabin, the other man, delirious with hunger, imagines that Charlie is a gigantic chicken. (Big Jim is played by Mack Swain, a fat and endearing figure whom James Agee memorably described as looking like "a hairy mushroom" [5], and who made many shorts with Chaplin at Keystone Studios.) The delirium is funny, but Chaplin says he got the idea from the tragic story of the Donner party, California-bound American settlers who were lost in the Sierra Nevada mountains in the winter of 1846 and resorted to cannibalism in order to stay alive. (Chaplin had read Charles Fayette McGlashan's *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierras*, originally published in 1879; he might also have been partly influenced by Robert Flaherty's documentary film about Eskimo life, *Nanook of the North*, released in 1922.) Grimness as a source of comedy! On this point Chaplin himself said the following in his autobiography: "In the creation of comedy, it is paradoxical that tragedy stimulates the spirit of ridicule, because ridicule, I suppose, is an attitude of defiance: we must laugh in the face of our helplessness against the forces of nature—or go insane" (299).



7-8. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin





### 9. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin

From the Donner story, too, Chaplin elaborated the famous sequence of the boiled shoe. (Some members of the Donner party roasted and ate their moccasins.) The two men are so famished that they eat a shoe—the Tramp’s, of course. Charlie boils and serves it, and the humor comes not only from what they are eating but also from the way they eat it. A lesser comic inventor might have got laughs by having the Tramp and Big Jim go through grimaces of disgust as they forced themselves to chew. But, as with the bear incident, Chaplin raises the scene to a higher power, making it funnier by means of poetic imagination. Big Jim, you see, is jealous because the Tramp got the bigger piece, and switches plates. This is funnier than grimaces because it is *truer*. And the Tramp twirls the shoelaces on his fork like spaghetti, then sucks each nail as if it were a tasty little bone. The consolations of fantasy have rarely gone further.

All through Chaplin’s body of work, hunger is a recurrent subject of comedy. (One example among many: in *The Circus* [1928], the hungry Tramp steals bites from a child’s hot dog over the shoulder of the father who holds the boy in his arms.) Hunger is an inevitable subject for a tramp, particularly one whose creator had a childhood in surroundings, in the London slums, of wretched poverty and extreme hardship. Three times a day, life puts the Tramp at the mercy of “the forces of nature,” and three times a day Chaplin has the option of transmuting those forces into laughter for the film audience, if not for Charlie himself, so that all of us will not “go insane.” But there is an extraordinary aspect to this theme in *The Gold Rush*. Usually in Chaplin’s pictures the pinch of hunger comes from a social

stringency: no money. Here in the Klondike cabin, money is irrelevant. Chaplin thus takes the theme that has always had a sociopolitical resonance for him, isolates it into the Thing Itself, and makes it funnier than ever.



**10. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin**

The very harmonics of the picture—light tone against dark, light tone arising *out* of dark and vice versa—is enriched by the Tramp’s first entrance into the dance hall in the boomtown. Chaplin, the director, avoids the conventional sequence: showing us the bustling saloon and then showing us the Tramp looking at it—which would mean looking at the camera. He shoots past the Tramp (who is in long shot, in the center, lower portion of the screen), from behind, to the saloon interior. Charlie is in outline; the brightness is beyond him. He watches from the edge, the outsider looking in at a crowd that ignores him; and we watch from an edge ever farther behind him. Yet because he is seen from slightly below eye level, there is something strong, almost heroic, in the pathos of the image, and simultaneously, there is something comic in the Tramp’s silhouette (particularly as we can see his shoeless right foot wrapped in rags). It is the classic, quintessential Chaplin shot.

But pathos and comedy are heightened in the next moments. A man comes to stand behind Charlie, unseen by him. At the bar the barkeep says to Georgia (if we watch his mouth closely), “There’s Charlie.” She turns and says, “Charlie,” smiles, and comes toward the Tramp. He’s mystified but happy—and then she goes right past him to greet the man behind him. Chaplin had used the idea of mistaken greetings before, notably in a two-reeler called *The Cure* (1917), but only to be funny. Here it is funny, but it also crystallizes another matter: the moment of his falling in love despite his forlorn condition.





### 11. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin

Georgia is played by Georgia Hale, whom Chaplin had seen in Josef von Sternberg's first film, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925). Her career did not go on long after *The Gold Rush*, which is odd because her performance is perfect: she supplies exactly the right qualities of sauciness, sex, and tenderness. Hale clearly plays the part with a knowledge of what would now be called the subtext, the meaning below the surface. This dance-hall girl is a prostitute; what else could she possibly be? (One of her friends at the dance hall is a beefy, older woman, with the look of a traditional madam.) Nothing is done or said to explicate this matter; it is simply there for those who can see it, and it deepens the film for them.

Children, as I can remember from my own experience, see the characters in this situation as "innocent." It seems to be another version of the *Petrushka* story (Stravinsky, 1911), in which a haughty soubrette prefers a handsome extrovert and rebuffs the shy man unable to demonstrate the worth that we, the audience, perceive. Adults, however, can see that the other man, the imposing young prospector, has some aspects of a prostitute's "bully." More: when Georgia and the other girls are playing in the snow one day near Charlie's cabin, an outing that accidentally leads to her discovery of his devotion, the sequence recalls the feeling of Maupassant's "Madame Tellier's Establishment" (1881), where we read about the staff of a bordello frisking on holiday. The point of this unseemly subtext is not merely to slip innuendo past the censor. It provides, for those able to see it, a further stratum of reality for the *comedy* and, since the Tramp never recognizes what Georgia in fact is, further proof of his armor of innocence.

In other words, Chaplin deliberately chose to have the world-beloved Tramp

fall in love with, and finally win, a prostitute, in an American comedy—seemingly as a tacit certification of the postwar era's changing sexual standards, which complemented America's granting women the right to vote in 1920. The 1920s, after all—the Roaring Twenties or the Jazz Age—were part of the Machine Age between the two world wars: the age, that is, which saw the rise of mass consumption, and with it the mass production of radios, phonographs, automobiles, telephones, and motion pictures. During this period, the common man and woman were getting more and more freedom of an economic as well as political kind, and Chaplin saw that such freedom would inevitably include sexual license as well.

During the “free” Georgia's encounter with Charlie on her outing, he invites her and the other girls to New Year's Eve dinner in his cabin. They accept, knowing that they will not attend. On that evening, Charlie prepares an elaborate table setting and a big meal, then sits down to wait—and wait and wait. At last he nods off at the table and dreams that the guests have come, that all is joyous. In one of the most celebrated moments in all Chaplin films, Charlie at one point entertains the adoring girls (in his dream) by doing the Oceana Roll. Sitting at the table, he sticks two forks into two sabot-shaped rolls, then kicks and jigs them as if they were his legs and he were doing a chorus-girl dance. (An earlier version of Chaplin's iconic dance of the rolls can be seen in the Fatty Arbuckle silent comedy *The Rough House* [1917].) Every time I see this sequence coming, I think, “I know every move he's going to make. He can't possibly make me laugh again.” And every time he does. One reason, deduced from my last viewing, is that Chaplin does not merely kick his fork “legs”: he uses his whole body behind the forks, his utter concentration, in pinpoint reproduction of a chorus girl's performance. And typical of *The Gold Rush*'s complex harmonics, this hilarious pantomime occurs in a dream into which the Tramp has fallen because he has been tricked and disappointed.

The dream dinner, I should also note, exemplifies another theme that runs through Chaplin's work, the mirror image of the hunger theme discussed earlier. Instead of hunger, we get here the opposite extreme, the feast, the laden table, which has an effect in Chaplin films like that of feasts in the novels of Dickens (another man who knew poverty in London). Plentiful food means, not gluttony, but love: an atmosphere of community, conviviality, and affection. One of the most touching moments in *The Kid*, for example, is the huge breakfast that the Kid prepares for himself and his “father,” the Tramp. In *The Gold Rush*, the golden brown turkey at the New Year's Eve dinner is the Tramp's contribution to an atmosphere in which human beings can be human. Chaplin's idea of a low and dehumanized state is not hunger, then, but the insult to the full table that occurs when no humans, or not enough humans, are present. In *Modern Times* (1936), the Tramp is strapped to an automatic feeding machine—with food enough, that is, but without feeling. The result is the debasement of a daily joy.



## 12. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin

Such pantomime as we see in the dance of the rolls is evidence, moreover, of the fact that Chaplin, like Buster Keaton, groomed his skills on the theatrical stage—specifically, in the British music hall—before he started making longer films, in the 1920s, in which he attempted to blend slapstick with traditional narrative. Chaplin, however, remained much more closely wed to his popular, vaudevillian entertainment roots than Keaton did. In Chaplin's films we see music-hall gags like the Oceana Roll transferred to the screen fairly intact; his routines thus retain much of their original scale and style. He rarely uses film to enlarge the physical scale of his gags by including the extended real world, as Keaton does. On the contrary, Chaplin brings in the camera so as to focus more closely on smaller-scale gags, precisely of the kind exemplified by the dance of the rolls. While Keaton's camera captures his body in relationship to a very real and potent world, Chaplin's camera tends, by contrast, to isolate him from the world so that we can revel in the charm and physical grace of his performance.

One need only think of each comedian's most famous gag to understand this basic distinction: again, the Oceana Roll from *The Gold Rush* and the falling-wall sequence from Keaton's *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). In the former, Chaplin executes a classic transformation gag as he spears the two dinner rolls with forks and moves the forks and rolls as if they were a pair of dancing legs. The scene is captured in a medium shot (almost a close-up) of Charlie at a dinner table, and the closeness of the camera allows him to emphasize the delicate motions of the dancing rolls. This scene is emblematic of Chaplin's approach to transferring his vaudeville to film, for he uses film here to bring the audience closer to the action. He also achieves



greater emotional intimacy through his use of medium shots and close-ups, a shot selection that supports his somewhat sentimental narratives as well as his fine, detailed gag work—in which Chaplin gets his laughter less from the gag itself than from his genius for what may be called inflection, or the perfect, changeful shading of his physical and mental attitudes *toward* the gag.

Conversely, Keaton's trademark gag, the falling wall, evinces a different aesthetic. Rather than moving the camera closer for greater detail and intimacy, Keaton pulls it back in order to capture Buster's relationship to the environment around him. While Chaplin uses medium shots and close-ups to create audience empathy for the plight of the Tramp, Keaton prefers to use the long shot to create a larger picture—one that visually exceeds the boundaries of his body. In this way Keaton projects his comic vision onto the world rather than keep that vision contained within his own character, as does Chaplin. Particularly in his films' climactic sequences, Keaton's use of extreme long shots provides the audience with greater psychic distance from his character, a quality that is amplified by his understated acting style. (Luis Buñuel himself commended this aspect of Keaton's work when he designated him "the great specialist in fighting sentimental inflections of all kinds" [110].) Whereas Chaplin usually concludes his feature films with a catharsis naturally deriving from his narrative (as in the union of Georgia and Charlie at the end of *The Gold Rush*, or the close-up of the tearful Tramp at the end of *City Lights* [1931]), in keeping with his concern to develop the emotional aspects of his story rather than explore film's ability to expand the visual realm or physical scale of his comedy, Keaton frequently neglects to provide the emotional release of a sentimental ending. Instead, he resolves his films in physical chases executed on the grandest possible scale, and depends for dramatic closure on the fulfillment of his acrobatic grace rather than on the audience's psychological identification with his character.

Let me now describe one more scene in *The Gold Rush*—although it is hard to limit oneself—as an instance of Chaplin's comic distinctiveness and invention. When Charlie and Big Jim wake up in the lonely cabin to which they have returned in their search for Jim's lost claim, they do not realize, of course, that during the night the cabin was blown to a new location: the very edge of a cliff. They are unable to see out the frost-covered windows. As the cabin begins to shift on the precipice, Charlie decides to have a look at the trouble. He opens the back door—and swings out into immense (studio-created) space, hanging for dear life onto the doorknob. (If I had to vote for the single funniest sight gag in films, I would probably choose this moment.) Big Jim pulls the Tramp back inside. Then comes a sequence in which the two men, one slight and the other burly, try to inch their way up the increasingly slanted floor toward the safe side and the front door. It is a pearl of invisible dynamics, in which they cautiously *will* their bodies upward—a monument to spirit-flesh dichotomy.



### 13. *The Gold Rush* (1925), dir. Charles Chaplin

Like so much in Chaplin's films, and in farce generally, this cabin sequence is built on danger, scary but seen from the safety of relatively distant shots. We are dealing here with the quantum of the banana peel greatly multiplied: we know how it would feel if it were happening to us, but we also know that it is not happening to us. "Long shot for comedy, close-up for tragedy," was one of Chaplin's most famous pronouncements (quoted in Gehring, *Chaplin's War Trilogy*, 77). The proxemics principles are sound, for when we are close to a dangerous or risky action—a person slipping on the proverbial banana peel, for example—it is seldom funny, for we are concerned for the individual's safety. If we see the same event from a greater distance, however, it often strikes us as comical. Chaplin used close-ups sparingly for this very reason. So long as the Tramp remains in long shots, the audience tends to be amused by his crazy antics, absurd predicaments, and breathtaking brushes with danger.

Comedy of all kinds, then, depends on perception and (superior) vantage point. In high comedy, which usually deals with social criticism, we can recognize the hypocrisy or vanity or whatever it may be, acknowledge secretly that we share it, and laugh with relief that it is being pilloried in someone else. In farce, the materials are often physical, and are often the dangers of daily life that surround us all the time, even when we are crossing the street; action leads to objects, that is to say, and they frequently defeat the characters, or at least momentarily impede them. But the *farceur* makes injury and possible death simultaneously real and

unreal. We know, for example, that the Tramp and Big Jim will not be killed in the cabin—it simply could not happen in this kind of picture; yet we feel the danger they experience in our own viscera. We are frightened at the same time that we enjoy the skill of artists who have nullified extinction. Farce characters—important ones—never get killed. (Three men do die in *The Gold Rush*, however: the villainous prospector Black Larsen and the two lawmen he kills.) These figures contrive for the audience a superiority over mortality, even as they make us laugh at their struggles to escape it.

To this farcical heritage of danger combined with subconscious assurance of safety, Chaplin adds two unique touches, each of which I alluded to earlier. The first is feeling. Most farces turn their characters into objects akin to the objects, or things, that are contriving to defeat them; that is, farce usually dehumanizes its ostensibly human figures as they pursue short-term goals and immediate gratification. But Chaplin combines farce with feeling in *The Gold Rush* (as he began to do, in feature-length form, with *The Kid*), for Georgia and his other fellow human beings—and for animals, as well (Black Larsen's dog in the cabin at the start of the film, for one). He also combines farce with physical grace, the second Chaplin touch. All through his career it is manifest, as in the dangerous skating sequences of both the early short *The Rink* (1916) and the later feature *Modern Times*. One of the most famous remarks about Chaplin was made by W. C. Fields, who, with salty verbal ornament, declared that Charlie was “the best ballet dancer that ever lived” (quoted in Taylor, 19). What Fields omitted is that the ballet in this instance is often performed in the face of death.

The finish of *The Gold Rush* strengthens and resolves the light-dark harmonics of the whole, of the grace and feeling displayed by Charlie in the face of denigration, danger, and death. Some have objected to the ending because it is contrived to be happy, because the Tramp does not walk unaccompanied down the isolated road at the end. But, as a matter of fact, that lonely walk is not the typical conclusion of his feature films: *The Kid*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times* also end happily. (As for Chaplin's shorts, *The Bank* [1915], *The Vagabond* [1916], *A Dog's Life* [1918], and *Shoulder Arms* all end with either the suggestion or the revelation that the Tramp's attainment of marital happiness has all been a dream.) For *The Gold Rush*, if the end was to be happy, it meant, because of the subject matter in this case, that Charlie had to end up rich. Even this is not much different from *The Kid*, which finishes with the Tramp going into the rich woman's house to join her and the Kid, presumably to stay.

*The Gold Rush* differs only in that we see Charlie rich, though the logic of the character demands that he come to his money fortuitously, not through his own efforts. (Indeed, we never even see the Tramp prospecting in this film about the Alaskan gold rush, and the only time we see him do work-for-pay, it is for the sake of others: he shovels snow in town in order to make money to buy provisions

for the New Year's Eve dinner he is hosting.) Essential though the wealth is thematically, this was not the image that Chaplin wanted to leave before our eyes, so he devised a way for the rich Charlie to don his Tramp clothes once again—in a scene arranged so that Georgia thinks the Tramp is a stowaway and offers to pay for his passage, before she finds out about his money. The Tramp persona, thus resumed, gives Georgia, the prostitute, a chance to prove the genuineness of her feelings, and it gives Chaplin a chance to score a last point. To wit: the Tramp had to be dragged away from Georgia by Big Jim, had to be dragged to wealth, as it were; now that wealth brings the lovers together again on the ship returning to the States. Money and happiness, Chaplin seems to say, are at the whim of two powers: fate and *auteurs*.

But an even subtler harmonic complexity runs through the film, through most of Chaplin's major films. The element that persists, through the comedy and through the pathos that makes the comedy beloved, is a sense of mystery. No job can more than temporarily chain the Tramp to a routine; no luxuries can seduce him into settling down; no ideology can trap him into conformity; and no psychological past, no personal history, can circumscribe him. Who *is* the Tramp, then? What is the secret of his unique effect on us?

Consider: here is a prospector who appears on a mountain trail wearing a winged collar and tie. We never question this; we never even really notice it. All right, perhaps that is because the Tramp's costume has by now become an internationally accepted set of symbols. After he gets a job of sorts (as the cabin-caretaker) in the boomtown, the Tramp, who has been collarless for a while, again has a collar and tie. Even though this is a rough Alaskan town, again we don't even notice the improbability, if not impossibility, of his outfit. When, early in *The Gold Rush*, Charlie and Big Jim are snowbound and starving in the cabin, Jim's whiskers grow and the Tramp's do not. Who is the little fellow?

But then the Tramp's characteristics move from costume into action, and we really begin to wonder. When Georgia invites him to dance in his silly clothes and with one foot still wrapped in rags to replace the eaten shoe, he dances with exquisite style. Who *is* he? When the Tramp invites the girls to dinner, he not only knows how to cook, he also knows all about table settings, party favors, dainty gift wrappings, and etiquette. Who *is* he? When he performs the Oceana Roll, he knows a chorus-girl routine. Who *is* he? When Georgia's bully boy tries to force his way into her room against her will, Charlie bars the door to the hulking man with a knightly chivalry that is contemptuous of the danger to himself. Again—who *is* he?

I propose no supernatural answer, that the Tramp is a divine messenger in ragged clothes, a fool of God. I do suggest that part of the genius of Chaplin, part of his superiority to all other film comics except Buster Keaton, is his ability to make us believe in a comic character whose standards are better than our own, just

as his body in motion is more beautiful than our bodies. I suggest that one of the reasons we have loved him all these decades—and young people seem to feel that *they* have loved him for decades, too—is that he has concentrated not on merely making us laugh, but on showing us the funniness in a clown like hero who is an unsententious agent of exemplary values. Charlie is not dully angelic, to be sure; he sometimes pulls off con games, though usually to a good end or to flout oppressive authority. But in the main he compensates for the shortcomings, social and physical, of our lives and beings. In his magical movement and in his moral code, even in his survivalist cunning, he is what we feel we ought to be.

“Chaplin’s Tramp,” wrote Robert Warshow,

. . . represented the good-hearted and personally cultivated individual in a heartless and vulgar society. The society was concerned only with the pursuit of profit, and often not even with that so much as with the mere preservation of the ugly and impersonal machinery by which the profit was gained; the Tramp was concerned with the practice of personal relations and the social graces. Most of all the Tramp was like an aristocrat fallen on hard times, for what he attempted in all his behavior was to maintain certain standards of refinement and humanity, to keep life dignified and make it emotionally and aesthetically satisfying. (177)

The Tramp, then, is the man who stands apart, the exceptional individual misunderstood and rejected by the society around him, a better grade of human being whose unfitness for the tasks of that society only underscores his personal superiority, his interest in higher things.

Although Chaplin’s films carry an implied social protest, an appeal for change, he does not propose his character as any sort of revolutionary, for the Tramp would be as unfit to take action against society as he is to work within its constrictions. Moreover, he is too insular to show much solidarity with the poor, and too singular to be regarded as typical of them. We are to side with Charlie for his intrinsic *human* qualities, for what he is in himself, apart from anything he does or could do or anything he stands for beyond himself. His strongest bond is with us, the spectators, rather than with any of the other characters in his films: he communicates with the audience in a kind of intense isolation, to borrow Louise Brooks’s phrase (quoted in Card, 240), tacitly addressing us with an entreaty to recognize his fine qualities and the injustice of a society that does not. Sometimes he gets the girl, it’s true, but never as a result of his having undertaken any conventional courtship: the Tramp gets her because she, like us, is sensitive enough to appreciate his personal worth. If society at large will not accommodate the Tramp, that is for Chaplin sufficient reason to condemn it, and he concentrates our attention on his character’s unique individual qualities, upholding them—as he does so brilliantly in *The Gold Rush*—against an order that callously discounts them.

Bertolt Brecht wrote in 1926 that he himself went to see *The Gold Rush* only after some delay, because it had made his theater friends despondent about the theater. He reports that the picture made him share their despondency, but not because he feels there is a hierarchical difference between the arts of theater and film. The difference is Chaplin. Brecht says that Chaplin is an artist who “already qualifies as a historical event” (5). Yes. *The Gold Rush* is a marvel, and it is Chaplin himself who is the event in art.

Chaplin disposed of the Tramp in the 1930s with the onset of the Depression and the run-up to the horrors of the Second World War, and one of the reasons may have been the trait of sentiment or heightened feeling in the character. One suspects that Chaplin fest restive or out of sync under this restriction, as well as others imposed on him by the figure of the Tramp. After his last Charlie film, *Modern Times*, and *The Great Dictator* (1940), in which he played a barber who still preserved some of the qualities of the Tramp, Chaplin produced *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947). Verdoux murders women for their money. He is thus the complete opposite of the Tramp, like an alter ego of Charlie avenging himself on the opposite sex.

Another reason for the disappearance of the Tramp was the advent of sound in the cinema. Language may be the means of conveying ambiguities of emotion and shadings of feeling in relationships, but above all it is the means of communicating intellectual ideas. But the Tramp, no less complicated than Verdoux, is not a thinker (though Chaplin’s films, particularly *The Gold Rush*, contain ideas or themes), and language, through sound in the sound film, requires thought, or one could say that language and thought naturally go together. Only through pantomime can the Tramp express himself, express his emotions. That is his limitation—and his glory.

*The Gold Rush* remains today the highest-grossing silent comedy. When it was originally released in England, BBC Radio broadcast ten solid minutes of audience laughter from the premiere. When the film opened in Berlin, one sequence—the famous dance of the rolls—was so wildly received that it was run back and played again, a rare instance of a cinematic encore. Contributing to *The Gold Rush*’s fame, ironically, was its banning by Goebbels in 1935 because it did not “coincide with the world philosophy of the present day in Germany” (“Newsreel,” 2), in addition to the fact that Chaplin had been caricatured in various anti-Semitic publications as the archetypical Jew, even though he was not Jewish. “Jewish,” for the propagandists, meant crafty and inventive and possessed of all the unheroic advantages of the underdog—just the resources that Chaplin’s screen character had so often availed himself of.

Yet by 1942, despite Goebbels’ inadvertent endorsement, Chaplin nonetheless felt compelled to reissue *The Gold Rush* for an audience that—only seventeen years after the picture’s initial release, and only six since the defiantly (near) silent



*Modern Times*—had mostly never seen a silent movie. There was no television then, after all, and no revival houses to make such a cinematic work available again. He therefore chose to guide the audience through the experience by means of an explicit musical score and an orotund narration—in Chaplin's own voice—that is drawn from the same half-remembered well of Victorian instruction as, say, Edward Everett Horton's later voice-over for Jay Ward's animated *Fractured Fairy Tales* shorts (1959-63).

Chaplin also eliminated a subplot (the bounder Jack's cruel hoax in which he fools the Tramp into thinking that Georgia has written him a conciliatory letter) from the 1942 version of *The Gold Rush*, as well as the scene in which, once settled in the boomtown, the Tramp sells his prospector's equipment. In addition, he truncated the ending (the Tramp does not kiss Georgia and thereby elicit the photographers' extra-cinematic comment that "You've spoiled the picture"), which perhaps did suffer from romantic overload as a result of Chaplin's liaison, in real life, with Georgia Hale. But very little is finally sacrificed from the film; there is no real downside. (This was, moreover, Chaplin's preferred version.) The re-release of *The Gold Rush* helpfully came in the middle of World War II; it helped extend Chaplin's franchise to another generation; and, perhaps most importantly, it helped preserve the footage of the original, which remains as crystal-clear, economical, and direct as anything ever committed to celluloid.

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## Jean Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*

Jean Renoir's film *The Rules of the Game* was first shown in Paris, in 1939, to a thoroughly hostile audience, yet it is now generally, and I would think rightly, regarded as one of his masterpieces. But there is a strange side to the film. What most critics and reference books say concerning it—and they tend to say much the same thing—does not, to put it bluntly, square with the facts.

Let me quote from the *New Oxford Companion to Literature in French* (1995): *The Rules of the Game* is “about an aristocratic house-party that is a microcosm of the corruptness and exhaustion of French society on the eve of World War II” (684). Here is Philip Kemp, in the liner notes to the 2003 BFI DVD of the film: “The seemingly elegant, old-world gathering is riven with rancour and hatreds, social, political and racial. The rules of the game are designed to exclude those who fail to grasp the unspoken assumptions behind them” (n.p.). According to Celia Bertin, in her biography *Jean Renoir: A Life in Pictures* (1991), Renoir “wanted to tell the story of people dancing on a volcano. . . . He knew that the slaughter of rabbits and pheasants prefigures the death of men. War was inevitable, and he was thinking about it all the time now” (161; as Bertin also tells us on page 156, however, Renoir “felt the need to express his anxiety by imagining what he called ‘a happy drama’ [*un drame gai*]”).



### 14. *The Rules of the Game* (1939), dir. Jean Renoir

From *French Cinema from Its Beginnings to the Present* (2002), by Rémi Fournier Lanzoni, I shall give a longer extract, along much the same lines:

This fantasy is a mundane massacre, and a sharp vision of prewar social degeneration, with a hint of several theatrical traditions (Beaumarchais, Musset, Marivaux). . . . This comedy, which veered inescapably into a dramatic finale, illustrated a series of ruptures in the social order. For example, the scene showing the senseless carnage of rabbits in the forest became an omen for the disproportionate combats that occurred a few weeks later all over Europe, and it exemplified society's plunge into pointless violence. . . . Throughout the film, viewers can feel that the rise of the impending threat of a possible world conflict, coupled with a deep apprehension of hostile foreign neighbors, had generated a defeatist mind-set about the prospects for the future of France (92, 94).

What on earth, one asks oneself, is one to make of this? It seems quite baseless. None of the characters in Renoir's film even mention war or the future of France; and it is not clear how a massacre of rabbits, or indeed of anything, can "become" an omen. Still, that did not deter Alexander Sesonske, writing for Criterion in 2003, to opine something similar to what Lanzoni says:

By February 1939 it no longer seemed evident that the surrender of Czechoslovakia to Adolf Hitler at Munich 'saved the peace.' Soon a sense of doom would hang over Europe. In this atmosphere Jean Renoir, anticipating war and deeply troubled by the mood he felt around him, thought he might best interpret that state of mind by creating a story in the spirit of French comic theater, from Marivaux to de Musset, a tradition in which the force that sets every character in motion is love and the characters have no other occupation to interfere with this pursuit. (n.p.)

Moreover, what is all this that Philip Kemp tells us about the "elegant, old-world gathering" at the Marquis de la Chesnaye's chateau being "riven with rancour and hatreds, social, political and racial"? As to race, there is only a single brief reference to it in the film. One of the servants at the downstairs dining table says that it should be remembered that Chesnaye is a "Yid" (meaning that his mother was Jewish), but the chef avers, firmly, that nevertheless the marquis has "quality." That he has "class" is also what the elderly General (who, if anyone, might have been expected to harbor social prejudices) is quick to affirm in Chesnaye's defense, when a guest hints that the Marquis has told a lie. Apart from this, one would seek in vain for signs of "rancour and hatreds," any more than of Celia Bertin's "volcano."

As for the "corruptness and exhaustion of French society on the eve of a war," one is struck by the zest and energy, the noisy and joyous *brio*, of Chesnaye's guests on their arrival at La Colinière (the country estate where Renoir's story takes place). It sets the tone for the excited swiftness, the sense of ceaseless movement running

through the film and complemented by Renoir's ever-mobile camera. Nor is any of the guests, so far as one can see, noticeably "corrupt." Yet, the tendency to see them as such goes back a long way: Gerald Mast, for instance, writing in 1973, declared that "the tendency to see [*The Rules of the Game*] as a purely satirical indictment of a corrupt social system dominates the reviews written since the reconstructed print of the film appeared in 1959" (69-70). And Robin Wood, in 1984, argued that the film was detested when it first appeared precisely because it was "satirizing the corruption of the French ruling class on the brink of the Second World War" (390).

The structure of *The Rules of the Game* is a descendant of the comic French theater of the eighteenth century, and that should tell us something more about its subject matter than what the critics have deduced. An opening title quotes Beaumarchais, one of the comic dramatists of that century, and all during the film there are echoes of other dramatic works from other centuries in addition to the eighteenth—works by Marivaux and de Musset, also Molière and Feydeau, even Shakespeare and Jonson, indeed many masters of classical comedy. It is therefore no accident that the film's major-domo, one of the figures of competence and order, is named Corneille, the great French neoclassical *tragedian*, who placed duty before passion.

*The Rules of the Game* manipulates throughout the devices of classical comedy. There are parallel actions on the part of masters and servants, the activities of the lower classes being a "vulgar" and low-comic mirror of those in the upper ones. As in classical comedy, the subject matter is love—requited and unrequited; requited and then unrequited; unrequited and then requited—as well as the consequent errors of love—jealousy, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding. The narrative of the film plays several interlocking love triangles against the background of the two societies—that of the masters and the servants. And it does so with a fondness for the theatrical group shot in which several characters are linked and the continuous re-framings, along with the entrances and exits, ensure that the spectator's gaze is constantly transferring itself from character to character, action to action, as it would be in the theater—with few close-ups and point-of-view shots. There are even such classical comic devices as the interwoven chase (various lovers weaving in and out of rooms searching for their own beloved), the mistaken identity arising from a piece of clothing (Lisette's cloak and Octave's raincoat), and the farcical slap in the face and kick up the backside (the fights between André and Saint-Aubin, André and the Marquis de la Chesnaye).

Most like the classical theater, and in fact like any traditional French play, *The Rules of the Game* is built in five acts. The overall structure of the film, as in classical comedy, is to introduce the individual human pieces in the early acts, to bring them together shortly thereafter, to scramble them in the middle acts, and then to sort them out for the conclusion. The great difference, of course, between Renoir's

film and classical comedy—a difference that he deliberately manipulates—is that his film contains a number of events, characters, and themes not usually found in traditional comedy. Whereas traditional comedy often ends with a party, a dance, and even a marriage, Renoir chooses not to end his film with a party but to add a serious, melancholy, and altogether catastrophic act after the party ends. This inspired juxtaposition of serious material and comic devices is ultimately what gives *The Rules of the Game* its dramatic power, its human complexity, and its intellectual richness.

The leading character in the film, the Marquis de la Chesnaye, himself is an impressive and most attractive figure. By a neat little directorial stroke we are made to see that he is the product of a strictly aristocratic upbringing. When his valet brings him his coat and scarf, he takes them without a glance, as if quite unaware of the valet's existence. But, on a personal level, he is not at all what this might lead one to expect. The Marquis is enlightened and egalitarian, a hater of all barriers—including social ones; and, being a man of feeling, he is also a masterly handler of human crises. He is evidently a magnificent host, having arranged for his guests, in addition to a hunt, several brilliant little fancy-dress entertainments on his private stage. The film is, among other things, a warm tribute to him and his values.



### 15. *The Rules of the Game* (1939), dir. Jean Renoir

It is for Chesnaye a “rule of the game” that, if somebody falls in love with one’s partner and the love is returned, it is contemptible to nurse vindictive feelings and even more so to act on them. In this he contrasts with a friend of his, André Jurieu, a young aviator. André is in love with Chesnaye’s wife, Christine, and is determined to make a tragic and public business of it. Chesnaye himself has for several years,

unknown to Christine, had a mistress, Geneviève—a fact that Christine finds out by accident during the hunt. She is looking through binoculars and catches sight of them kissing. (It is actually a farewell kiss, for the relationship has cooled.) But Christine proves to adhere to her husband's "rule of the game" quite as firmly as he does; and, indeed, as the fruit of some frank conversation, she and his lover Geneviève are soon the best of friends. (They agree that he has only one grave fault: he smokes in bed.) Chesnaye's love for Christine has actually revived, but her own feelings are in a muddle. She does not know what she wants; or rather, what she really wants is to have a child.

Chesnaye's "rule" is an excellent one but more suited to a leisured aristocrat than to someone like the gamekeeper Schumacher, who has to work for his livelihood. It is one of Schumacher's grievances that he so rarely can see his wife, Lisette, who, as Christine's chambermaid, spends much of the time with her mistress in Paris. Another of his grievances is that Chesnaye has recently encountered a wily poacher named Marceau at La Colinière, and, being greatly taken with the man, has taken him into his household. Marceau is trying to seduce Lisette, and the jealous Schumacher, finding the two in each other's arms, chases Marceau through the house, threatening to kill him. Chesnaye comes to the poacher's aid this time, but soon Schumacher is again pursuing Marceau, revolver in hand (though some of the house guests, at first disconcerted by the spectacle, assume that it is all part of Chesnaye's program of entertainment).



### 16. *The Rules of the Game* (1939), dir. Jean Renoir

Eventually it becomes plain to Chesnaye that André has won Christine's affections, and, forgetting his "rule" for a moment, the Marquis gets into a fist fight with him. Then, coming to his senses, he is full of abject apologies for his shameful behavior. With his handkerchief, Chesnaye solicitously helps brush the dust off André's jacket, which has suffered in the scuffle, and soon the two are as

good friends as ever. We are approaching the climax of the film when Christine, beset by André, tells him that she will run away with him, if it can be done this very instant, without further ado. But he, too, has a “rule”: Chesnaye is a friend and his host, he says, and it would simply be impossible to take such a step without telling him first.

Christine is then seen strolling with Octave in the gardens, in the chilly night air, and she not only describes her situation with André but also says that it is really not André she loves but Octave himself. For a minute or two, the bumbling and self-doubting, but warm-hearted Octave (played by Renoir himself) is convinced and believes that she is ready to elope with him; but he is brought to his senses by Lisette, who joins them and tells him angrily that he is too old for an affair with her beloved mistress. Christine is anxious at this point not to have to return to the chateau, and Octave tells her to take refuge in the conservatory. They put Lisette’s cloak round her for warmth, and Octave promises to fetch her own cloak for her from the chateau. André now appears, asking where Christine is, and Octave—silently renouncing all his own hopes—urges him to join her, putting his own coat round André’s shoulders.

Meanwhile Schumacher, reconciled in his misery to Marceau (for Chesnaye has dismissed them both), has fetched his shotgun and is sitting with him, watching the scene from the shadows. He is misled by the cloak into thinking that the woman in the conservatory is his wife, Lisette; and when André—whom he mistakes for Octave—approaches, he shoots him. Summoning his guests to the steps of the chateau, Chesnaye tells them the news and, with his usual resourcefulness, explains that the killing was an accident—as of course, in a sense, it was. Naturally, the group willingly and unemotionally agrees to accept what Chesnaye says as a gentlemanly display of good form.

Told like this, the plot of *The Rules of the Game* is surely not—not at all—what the critics’ account of it would have led us to expect. I used to be puzzled by their interpretation, but now I think it derives from a misunderstanding. The film, to Renoir’s bewilderment and dismay, went down extremely badly on its first showing in 1939, being hissed and jeered at. Renoir decided either to give up filmmaking or to leave France. The reason for the bad reception, it appears, is that—for a predominantly left-wing audience, justifiably obsessed, as Renoir himself was, by the imminent threat of a world war—*The Rules of the Game* was far too sympathetic towards the French aristocracy and in particular towards the Marquis de la Chesnaye. Thus, the lacerating reflections about the “degeneracy” of French society that critics find in it represent what (in their view) Renoir *ought* to have expressed, though in fact he did not.

Renoir’s own account in his autobiography, *My Life and My Films*, of how *The Rules of the Game* came to be conceived, is that it was inspired by eighteenth-century music in France—Couperin, Rameau, Mozart. Indeed, we are given a few



bars of Mozart's "Three German Dances, K. 605" at the beginning and the end of the film. (It is complemented by what one could call the "visual" music in *The Rules of the Game*, which comes from Renoir's depth-of-field shooting, enabling the staging of simultaneous foreground and background actions that often operate like counterpoint in music.) He had developed a great liking for such music, and it made him wish to film the "sort of people who danced to it" (169). They would, in the nature of things, have been aristocrats, and their outlook would very likely have been a "libertine" one. It would, he felt, be interesting to see what such people would be like if transposed to modern times. Renoir was, as he himself said, meaning to create a *drame gai*, a light-hearted drama in the style of *The Marriage of Figaro* (1784).

Accordingly, after the film's credits, these are the lines we are shown, on a placard, from Act IV, scene 10 of Beaumarchais's play:

Coeurs sensibles, coeurs fidèles,  
Qui blâmez l'amour léger,  
Cessez vos plaintes cruelles:  
Est-ce un crime de changer?  
Faint of heart, faithful hearts,  
Who condemn light-hearted love,  
Stop your cruel complaints:  
Is it a crime to change? (my translation)

Since we know from Renoir's own words that he was at this time, 1939, quite alarmed (as were many other intelligent people) by the terrifying prospect of a new world war, we can deduce that his film was clearly intended as an antidote to, or escape from, such alarm or anxiety. That in places it would, nevertheless, be extremely poignant, should not surprise anyone familiar with Beaumarchais's play or especially Mozart's 1786 operatic version of it.

After all, Renoir knew that the perfect grace and orderly, delicate perfection of the eighteenth century (the century that produced Mozart, Chesnaye's chateau, his aristocratic way of life, and his mechanical music boxes) could no longer exist in the twentieth century, with its airplanes, automobiles, radios, telephones, mass destruction, and empowered masses. To prefer the stability of the old order to the terrifying instability of the new disorder (as do the two aristocratic military officers, one French and one German, in Renoir's other masterpiece, *Grand Illusion* [1937]) is both human and understandable. It is also, unfortunately, an anachronism, and therefore a human impossibility. Still, even though the lower classes' dream of material ease and democratic freedom may point the way in which the world will go, the aristocratic ethos of *noblesse oblige*, of gentlemanly honor and chivalric spirit, embodies what the world will lose by going there.



In addition to knowing something about the onrush of modernity, Renoir knew that the order or rules of society and the chaos of passion are both necessary for human survival, that each threatens the existence of the other, and that neither of the two can be excluded from a meaningful life. The human condition for Renoir in *The Rules of the Game* is thus a delicate balance between the demands of order and spontaneity. But failure at this balancing act is as inevitable as the act itself. Man must juggle the two demands and he must also fail to juggle them perfectly, for they cannot ever be juggled perfectly. And the idea that human beings have been assigned an impossible task at which they are doomed to fail is one of the major components of the film's tone, contributing to the cold, acidic current, the black, grim, even tragic thread, which winds through this sometimes farcical comedy. *The Rules of the Game* may be light-hearted, then, but darkness nonetheless runs all through it.

In the face of the terrible reception given to the film, however, Renoir began to have misgivings about its nuanced lightness, as he tells us in *My Life and My Films*. All he had had in mind originally was “nothing avant-garde but a good little orthodox film,” and he had been utterly dumbfounded at finding that “the film, which I wanted to be a pleasant one, rubbed most people the wrong way” (172). This reception made him begin to ask himself: Had he been right in making no allusion to the threat of war in his film? Did the film, perhaps, give a shameful picture of present-day France? He mentioned these wonderings of his to others, though he found no answer to them, and maybe they were the origin of later critical attitudes—including, rather startlingly, his own, for, in 1974 in *My Life and My Films*, he went so far as to call *The Rules of the Game* a “war film . . . that attacks the very structure of our society” (171).

In any event, Renoir did leave France (to the Nazis, as it were), which in the end may not have been very good for him as a filmmaker. As for the film itself, when it was shown again in the 1950s, the French—released from the pressures of the grave year 1939—fell in love with it (and not only they), and it quickly acquired its present very high reputation as one of the best movies ever made. Far from perceiving in *The Rules of the Game* evidence of the “corruption” and “exhaustion” in French society that led to the country's defeat and occupation by the Germans during World War II, audiences in France now blithely saw the film for what it was—not for what historicist critics, as well as the elderly, legacy-conscious Renoir, wanted it to be.

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## Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane*

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One aspect of *Citizen Kane* (1941) has always puzzled me: why, aside from the opportunity it afforded them to display virtuoso technique, did Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz make a film about the dead Kane instead of a film about Kane while he was living? To my knowledge, no one has ever attempted to answer this question; yet, probably more has been written about *Citizen Kane* than any other American movie. If, as most critics believe, the “message” of *Citizen Kane* is the mystery of the titular character (McBride, 42; Sarris, 120-121; Carringer, “Rosebud,” 192; Naremore, *Magic World*, 66-68), then couldn't that mystery have been presented in traditional narrative form, a condensed “Life of Charles Foster Kane”? Couldn't that mystery have been represented *more subtly* in this way?

After all, it is pretty clear once Thatcher's “story” about the young Kane is over and Bernstein's begins, with an immediate contradiction of Thatcher (“It wasn't money [Mr. Kane] wanted. Thatcher never did figure him out”), that what we are going to get in the film is several more or less conflicting viewpoints on the man, none with any real depth, as much because given hastily or sketchily to a newspaper reporter who did not know Kane, as because given by biased individual. The “storytellers” simplify Kane, that is, to make their own points about him. No matter how many times I have seen *Citizen Kane*, therefore, I always become impatient the moment the reporter, Jerry Thompson, begins his interview of Bernstein, Kane's former business manager and now chairman of the board. I know somewhere inside myself that this method will not deliver, at least not the traditional narrative result: an ambiguous but fully developed, complex, *sympathetic* character.

Kane is not sympathetic in the traditional sense because we get to know him only through others' eyes. By contrast, Bernstein, Jed Leland, and Susan Alexander *are* sympathetic, because we get to know them through the eyes of the filmmakers, in the “narrative present.” But the film is clearly not about these three, or about Raymond the butler, the last of the storytellers. (Thatcher is dead; Thompson reads Thatcher's “story” of Kane from the former's memoirs.) It is about Charles Foster Kane, and to believe the critics as well as Orson Welles himself, whose obfuscatory words these are, “the point of the picture is not so much the solution of the problem [the mystery of Kane] as its presentation” (9).

But my point is, the presentation is apparently loaded: anyone could tell you that if you ask five different people about a man, you will get five different stories or interpretations. Those stories, of course, will reveal less about the man than about the bias of the individual storyteller. They will add up to nothing in particular because a human being's motives can never be satisfactorily fathomed by those closest to him. They can, however, be fathomed somewhat by the “objective author,” or by this author posing as someone who knew man. That is, presumably,

what much art is about: the providing of “answers” or motives for particular characters so that larger questions of life and character can be explored.

So I pose my question again: presuming that they were aware of what I have just said, why did Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz choose to make a movie about the dead Kane, through the eyes of others, rather than about the living Kane, through their own eyes? Is *Citizen Kane*, then, one large piece of chicanery, a contribution less to film art, according to Charles Thomas Samuels (171), than to the art of making films? (For a doubly negative view, that *Citizen Kane* is essentially both one large piece of chicanery and a *retrogression* in screen technique, see Otis Ferguson’s original review, 169-171.) Or is the film, on the other hand, as David Bordwell claims, a great achievement because it fuses “an objective realism of texture with a subjective realism of structure”? (in Gottesman, *Focus on Orson Welles*, 105).



### 17. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles

Bordwell believes that the method of *Citizen Kane* is its meaning. He writes the following:

*Kane* explores the nature of consciousness chiefly by presenting various points of view on a shifting, multiplaned world. We enter Kane’s consciousness as he dies, before we have even met him; he is less a character than a stylized image. Immediately, we view him as a public figure—fascinating but remote. Next we scrutinize him as a man, seen through the eyes of his wife and his associates, as a reporter traces his life story. Finally, these various perspectives are capped by a detached, omniscient one. In all, Kane emerges as a man—pathetic, grand, contradictory, ultimately

enigmatic. The film expresses an ambiguous reality through formal devices that stress both the objectivity of fact and the subjectivity of point of view. It is because the best contemporary cinema has turned to the exploration of such a reality that *Kane* is, in a sense, the first modern American film. (in Gottesman, *Focus on Orson Welles*, 105)

Now Bordwell is on to something when he says that Charles Foster Kane is “less a character than a stylized image,” and that, as a character, Kane is “pathetic.” But this critic fails to tell us how exactly we “enter Kane’s consciousness as he dies” and who owns the “detached, omniscient” perspective at the end of the film that caps all the other perspectives on Kane.

Bordwell’s oversights or omissions are characteristic of his argument in general: unlike the majority of critics on *Citizen Kane*, he believes that the “message” of the movie, beyond being the mystery of Kane the character, is the mystery of reality or of life itself. Once one concludes, however, that the object of a work of art is to present the mystery of reality, it is very easy to become mysterious oneself in writing about that work of art. After all, what else is there to say once one declares that the artwork depicts the mystery of reality? I for one do not believe that *Citizen Kane* presents the mystery of reality any more than the screwball comedy *His Girl Friday* (1940) presents an argument for the equality of women. I think that the film is first and last about Charles Foster Kane, as its title indicates, but I do think it is up to something in its eschewing portrayal of the living Kane that no one has yet detected, although David Bordwell begins to touch on the matter.

Two events occur in the film that, in my view, are clues to the filmmakers’ real intentions and the work’s true status. No one has ever really questioned, for example, the actions of Kane’s mother toward her son—actions that form a part of Thatcher’s story. Joseph McBride begins to question the actions of Mrs. Kane in sending her son away, but he then ends his speculation by unaccountably passing everything off to fate:

The family tensions are sketched in quickly and cryptically: the mother is domineering but anguished as she commits her son to Thatcher; the father is pathetic and clumsy in his objections. Why is she sending Charles away? To get him away from his father, who apparently abuses the boy when drunk? Perhaps. But more likely, given the aura of helplessness with which Welles surrounds the entire family, it is simply that the accident which made the Kanes suddenly rich has created its own fateful logic—Charles must “get ahead.” What gives the brief leave-taking scene its mystery and poignancy is precisely this feeling of predetermination. (43)

Mrs. Kane runs a boarding house in Colorado with her abusive and alcoholic husband. It is discovered that some seemingly worthless property she has inherited (from a boarder who defaulted on his rent) contains a mine shaft with large deposits of silver, and she instantly becomes rich. Although Mrs. Kane appears to have a very loving relationship with her son, she now decides to entrust Charles to the banker Thatcher, who will manage the boy's large inheritance and see to his education. But the film does not provide her with sufficient motivation to commit this act. Ostensibly she is worried about her husband's influence on the child, yet father and son seem to get on well enough, and Mrs. Kane shows herself to be more than in control of her husband's actions (apart from the fact that the "Colorado Lode" is in her name, and her name only). Let us keep in mind, in addition, that on the evidence of the film, once she gives her son over to Thatcher, *she never sees Charles again*. (Thatcher takes him back East to live.)

Why is Mrs. Kane so eager to take this action? She herself is now quite rich, so why doesn't she just retain custody of her child while having Thatcher look after her business affairs as well as advise her on her son's education and opportunities? Why can't she simply leave her husband (again, *she* owns the silver mine, though she would have to make some kind of compensatory payment to him in any divorce settlement), with whom she appears to have anything but a loving relationship, instead of give up her son? I am not saying that Mrs. Kane's action could not be made believable, although this would require great delicacy, but that Welles and Mankiewicz do not make it so.

I am not interested, moreover, in whether this happened in real life to William Randolph Hearst, on whom the character of Charles Foster Kane is in part based (as it also appears to be based in part on Howard Hughes). Truth is often stranger than fiction, it is said, but that does not relieve fiction of the burden of believability. That does not relieve Mr. Thatcher of the burden of believability, either. He may narrate this part of Kane's life, but Welles and Mankiewicz "narrate" him. In short, neither anything we are told about Mrs. Kane nor all that we know about mothers and their offspring can make Mrs. Kane's act comprehensible. (My argument is strengthened by the fact that Charles is the only child and surely, at the same time, the last one of the middle-aged Kanes.) It seems an outrage. What, then, is it doing in the film? Of course it is there to motivate Charles's search for love and for control over his world throughout his life. But, to repeat, why is his mother's action not made more believable?

I want to submit that this was not a simple oversight on the part of Welles and Mankiewicz, not another instance of hasty or one-dimensional Hollywood filmmaking. I believe that this is the first substantial clue we get in *Citizen Kane*, aside from the movie's treatment of the dead Kane as opposed to the living one, that what we are witnessing is intended primarily not as a character *study*—the approach



most critics take to the film—but as the *experience* of character: the experience of a character's foremost desires and frustrations, not through identification with the figure himself, but through identification with the narrative method of the picture that is about him. (This is quite different from David Bordwell's assertion that *Citizen Kane*'s narrative method per se is its meaning.) Welles and Mankiewicz “clue” us in that their film is not intended as a character study of Charles Foster Kane because he appears, on screen in Thatcher's memory, fabricated from the very start, the unnatural product of his mother's unnatural act.

Looked at in this light, the film's showy camera work, editing, and use of sound make more sense: they are the constant reminder, in their conspicuous artificiality, of the unreal world the protagonist inhabits, in others' memory. These devices and the world they embellish account for the unsettling effect that *Citizen Kane* has even on a viewer who has seen it many times. This is because we have been conditioned by most narrative film and literature to want to identify with the main character; in the case of cinema, we are encouraged to do so by a camera that often photographs the protagonist in close-up or otherwise isolates him, and that adopts the main character's point of view at crucial moments. We get none of this in *Citizen Kane* (we get everything but this), yet the picture purports to be about Charles Foster Kane. As a result, we are confused.



**18. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles**

Even Welles's celebrated deep-focus cinematography works to unnatural



effect in this film, whereas one would think, with André Bazin, that it would work to the opposite end. What depth-of-field shooting in *Citizen Kane* gives us initially is a sense of life, of peopled space, continuous with our own. But ironically, at the same time as such a device seems to be opening Kane up to us more, the flashbacks to his past, buttressed by salient technique, are frustrating our desire to decipher Kane and thus identify with him. We are enabled to inhabit this character's space, but not him. We are confused, yet we are held. That is the advantage of deep focus over Eisensteinian montage for this particular motion picture, where the use of the multiplaned image is called attention to as never before—all the more so here (unlike in the films of Jean Renoir) because background and foreground actions are often dramatically related or theatrically contrasted. Such an image continually teases us, by seeming to include us within its confines, that we will be able to know Charles Foster Kane completely, even as we know his "space," his entire domain, completely. For this reason, *we* never leave "Charlie," unlike virtually everyone else who knew him.

We never leave Kane, yet we cannot be said to identify or empathize with him. On balance, we do not find his personality so appealing and do not warm to him. As I have already noted, however, we are identified with the narrative method of the film that is about him. That method, for which the reporter Thompson supplies the cue, is the search for knowledge of Charles Foster Kane and thus in a sense power over him, and it is by extension the search for identification with and even love for him, through the finding in him of that which is most like ourselves. It is precisely the method of the film *Citizen Kane*, I am maintaining, that corresponds to (and itself signifies) the major experience of Charles Foster Kane's life: the search for power or control over his world, for total "knowledge" of it, and the quest to love and be loved by all who surrounded him.

One of the reasons, I suspect, that Orson Welles not only played the role of Kane, but also directed and co-wrote the film, was so that identification with the movie's narrative method—that is, identification with the one imposed on it by the director Welles—would substitute even more readily for identification with the character played by the actor Welles. The main character and the director would become almost indistinguishable, and in this way the experience of the film's narrative method, as charted by Welles, would become all the more the experience of Charles Foster Kane's foremost desires.



**19. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles**

In an article titled “Film as the Narration of Space,” Ira Jaffe gives another reason why we are identified with the narrative method of *Citizen Kane*. Not only does depth-of-field cinematography seem to include us within the confines of the film, to make Kane’s space and thus him accessible to us, but Welles’s moving camera (in the capable hands of Gregg Toland) also does this. The moving camera duplicates for us the central experience or conflict of Kane’s life: his search for open space, for the freedom, security, and motherly love of his childhood, and his entrapment in closed space, in the responsibilities that his vast fortune brings, in the snares such a huge sum of money plants, and in the materialism and coldness that it engenders.

Jaffe writes, for example, that

From the beginning we are caught up in a spatial action as the camera travels up in the night from the forbidding NO TRESPASSING sign on the outer fence of Xanadu, and numerous dissolves through the dark, often hilly terrain bring us closer to the lit window of the mansion ahead. Almost instantly we experience ourselves as overcoming obstacles in space including the layers of fences, gates, and hills, as bypassing odd sentinels such as the caged monkeys and the gondolas, and as dissolving space itself. Starting from a position of relative containment outside the fence, we rapidly obtain a certain release by transcending barriers in space, and by penetrating space itself. (100)

Once “we have penetrated the window and gained the access we found ourselves seeking,” however, “we also are confined in a new ay. For instead of occupying the presumable open, limitless space of the outdoors, we are, though in view of the window and within reach of nature, enclosed in the space of a room in the mansion” (Jaffe, 100-101). In a spatial analogy to Kane’s inner experience, we have desired knowledge of this character and the freedom to pursue it, only (to borrow Hamlet’s words) to be hoist by our own petard.



## 20. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles

The same spatial analogy to Kane’s inner experience applies to the reverse camera movement. In the scene at the Colorado boarding house where Mrs. Kane gives responsibility for Charles to Thatcher, the camera begins to pull back from the child, who is outside playing in the snow and seems to revel in the open, unencumbered space in which he finds himself. The movement of the camera, says Jaffe,

does not reveal, as it would in Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* [1975], yet more majestic space around the young hero. Instead, the camera retreats through a window into Mrs. Kane’s boarding house . . . The camera continues all the way back to a table toward which Mrs. Kane and Thatcher walk from the window in order to sign the legal agreement that will turn Charles over to the bank and result in his removal from Colorado and his parents. In the move back through the window into the house, the camera diminishes rather than expands the child’s space. . . . The camera movement changes the appearance of the space the hero occupies from open to closed. . . . Now he appears tiny within the firm frame of the distant window, which remains visible from the table at which sit his mother and Thatcher. (103-104)

As a result of the camera's reverse movement, we see, not more of little Charles, but less; we are locked away from him, so to speak, by the window that his father closes on his playful shouts, just as Mrs. Kane is by the agreement that she signs giving custody of her son to Thatcher. To put the matter metaphorically, no matter how cautious we are in seeking knowledge and freedom, no matter how certain we are that our next move will increase both of them, we can become victims of our own curiosity. Thus are we trapped by the narrative method of this film, even as Charles Foster Kane is trapped by his own experience.

The second clue to the filmmakers' intentions and the one that identifies the audience absolutely with the narrative method of the movie is the word Kane speaks before he dies: "Rosebud," the name of his childhood sled. Now no one is within earshot of Kane when he says this word on his deathbed: the nurse comes in only after she hears the glass ball smash onto the floor from the dead Kane's hand. Raymond, the butler, is nowhere to be seen, even though he later says that he heard Kane say "Rosebud" on his deathbed (as well as after he wrecks Susan's room, even though, here again, the butler is nowhere to be seen). How is it, then, that Jerry Thompson and all his news associates know that "Rosebud" was Charles Foster Kane's dying word? No one has ever asked this question; yet, it is clear that no one could possibly have heard Kane's last word—except us, the audience.

No one except us finds out that "Rosebud" is the name of Kane's childhood sled, either. That Thompson and his associates, in addition to Raymond, know what Kane said before he dies is the film's contrivance, conceit, or artifice; it is what makes the movie possible, what makes the dead Kane accessible to us. "Rosebud" is the identification of the audience with the search for knowledge of Charles Foster Kane and empathy with him. We are identified with this search from the start, because we receive information about Kane that no one else does. *We* search for the meaning of "Rosebud," thinking that it will give us total access to Kane, even as he said this word in a last attempt to gain total access to his past, so as to be able to fully comprehend it and possibly reorder it. We get the meaning but, like Kane's "knowledge" and power, it proves incomplete and unsatisfying.

Charles Foster Kane wanted to be President of the United States, to be known and loved by all and to govern them. Instead, he wound up a wealthy recluse. We want to know Kane and even to love him, yet what knowledge we get serves only to isolate us from him, in his death, just as, it could be said, he was isolated from himself in life. That is, Kane neither knew nor loved himself (or loved himself excessively, which is more or less the same thing), and that is why he needed so much recognition and affection from others, yet could not respond to them in kind however much he may have wanted to. Not only are we isolated from Kane, but we are also isolated from all who loved or knew him or had even just heard about him, for we know the meaning of "Rosebud," whereas they do not. That meaning returns us to Kane's childhood and abandonment by his mother. It

returns us, in other words, to what I have called the first clue to the strategy of the film that is about him.

Other interpreters of *Citizen Kane* also feel that “Rosebud” returns us to Kane’s childhood and abandonment by his mother; but they view the sled as a conventional symbol, whereas I see it, or rather I see the revelation that the sled bears the name Kane called out on his deathbed, more as a final confirmation of the film’s unique artistic strategy. Alan Stanbrook, for instance, believes that “‘Rosebud’ becomes the symbol of [Kane’s] youthful innocence, lost when he was adopted into a family of bankers. Money and the pursuit of wealth have robbed him of his humanity and left him isolated and lonely, vainly seeking happiness in an endless acquisition of gimcracks” (14). Peter Cowie takes Stanbrook’s interpretation of “Rosebud” one step further when he states that “[Rosebud] stands as a token of Kane’s unhappy relations with people in general. He has no friends, only acquaintances, because he insists on setting himself on a pedestal above those who seek to know him” (265).

Stanbrook and Cowie, then, represent the minority view of the film: they believe that the “message” of *Citizen Kane* is not the mystery of the Kane the character but his *depiction*, and they find that the appearance of the burning sled at the end provides the information for a definitive interpretation of Charles Foster Kane. Robert L. Carringer rightly attacks such critics as Stanbrook and Cowie, saying, “If this interpretation were valid, *Citizen Kane* might indeed be vulnerable to charges of intellectual shallowness and of attempting to pass off a creaky melodramatic gimmick in place of real analysis of its subject” (“Rosebud,” 185).

But then Carringer goes on, curiously, to interpret in the same way as Stanbrook and Cowie, not the sled, but the little glass globe that Kane drops from his hand as he dies. The glass globe, Carringer writes, is

self-enclosed; self-sustaining; an intact world in miniature; a microcosm. . . . Sealed off to intrusion from outside. Free also of human presence—and therefore of suggestions of responsibilities to others. But by the same token, free of human warmth—a cold, frozen world of eternal winter. Suggestive of Charles Foster Kane . . . the little glass globe, not Rosebud, incorporates the film’s essential insight into Kane. It is a crystallization of everything we learn about him—that he was a man continually driven to idealize his experiences as means of insulating himself from human life. (“Rosebud,” 191-192)

Carringer wishes to have his cake and eat it, too, however. For no sooner has he found the presence of the glass globe in the film to provide the information for a definitive interpretation of Kane, than he is claiming, at the opposite end of the spectrum from Stanbrook and Cowie, that the “message” of *Citizen Kane* is the mystery of the titular character and that “Rosebud” confirms this mystery, for it

“does not add significantly to our understanding of Charles Foster Kane . . . Rosebud finally yields up a figure at once clear and indistinct who is always less or more than the sum total of what is said about him. While appearing to give its assent that sentimental or facile notions like Rosebud can sum up a man’s life, the film actually works to rescue Kane from them” (Carringer, “Rosebud,” 192).

Most critics take this view of Carringer’s, that the identification of “Rosebud” only serves to confirm the mystery of Charles Foster Kane. Significant among these critics are David Bordwell and Joseph McBride. Bordwell sums up the received wisdom on the film and “Rosebud”:

Although it stands for the affection Kane lost when he was wrenched into Thatcher’s world, the sled is clearly not to be taken as the “solution” of the film. It is only one piece of the jigsaw puzzle, “something he couldn’t get or something he lost.” The Rosebud sled solves the problem that Thompson was set—“A dying man’s last words should explain his life”—but by the end Thompson realizes that the problem was a false one: “I don’t think that any word can explain a man’s life.” The appearance of the sled presents another perspective on Kane, but it doesn’t “explain” him. His inner self remains inviolate (NO TRESPASSING) and enigmatic. The last shots of the sign and of Xanadu restore a grandeur to Kane’s life, a dignity born of the essential impenetrability of human character. (in Gottesman, *Focus on Orson Welles*, 111)

McBride sees the revelation of the meaning of “Rosebud” as a very necessary part of *Citizen Kane*, not simply as one more piece of a large jigsaw puzzle. “The revelation of Rosebud,” writes McBride, “far from explaining the mystery of Kane’s futile existence, adds another dimension to it. If Welles had not shown us Rosebud, we would have continued to think that there could be a solution, and that Thompson is merely unable to find it. We would be left to conjure up our own solutions” (42). Furthermore, McBride sees the revelation of “Rosebud” as a character device, not to shed light on Kane, but to “fill in” Thompson: “Thompson is dignified by our realization that we had to see Rosebud to reach his understanding” (42).

Welles himself said of “Rosebud” in a 1963 interview in the *Times of London* that “it’s a gimmick, really, and rather dollar-book Freud” (quoted by Cowie in Jacobs, 264). Certainly “Rosebud” is a kind of gimmick, a contrivance, conceit, or artifice, as I interpret it, and “Rosebud” becomes dollar-book Freud if one interprets it in the manner that Alan Stanbrook and Peter Cowie do. I’ll leave the last word on “Rosebud” to Welles’s self-styled spokesperson, Pauline Kael, who takes the master at his word and elaborates on it in the way only she can: “The mystery in *Kane* is largely fake, and the Gothic-thriller atmosphere and the Rosebud gimmickry (though fun) are such obvious penny-dreadful popular theatrics that they’re not so

very different from the fake mysteries that Hearst's *American Weekly* used to whip up—the haunted castles and the curses fulfilled" (5).

I have attempted to explain how, as a piece of film art, *Citizen Kane* works, but a question remains, the one I posed at the start: Why specifically did Welles and Mankiewicz make a movie about the dead Kane instead of about Kane while he was alive? Although traditional narrative film form—a film about the living Kane—could not give us the *experience* of this character's foremost desires and frustrations in the same way that *Citizen Kane* does, it could do well enough by a complex *study* of him. The method is different, but the outcome would be about the same: greater understanding, finally, of the character and of ourselves. But *would* the outcome be the same in the case of Charles Foster Kane? I don't think so, because I believe that Welles and Mankiewicz conceived of Kane as a fundamentally pathetic character—that is, one not truly aware of what was happening to him and why—and that they felt the best way to treat him was after death, through the reports of others. In other words, I am saying that the filmmakers deliberately chose to make a movie about a pathetic character but to do in a way that would make the finished picture itself rise above pathos.

For Welles and Mankiewicz to have told the story of Kane while he was living would have been to achieve pathos and nothing more. Kane is not tragic because he is not fully self-aware, or is unable to be. He suffers but learns little from his suffering other than that, in his words, "I might have been a great man had I not been rich"—as if being "great" is the only thing that matters in life. (It would have been easy to feel sorry for Kane in a film of his *life*, because, in a sense, he was helpless. It is much harder to feel nothing more than sorrow for a tragic figure, who is not helpless and in whom one therefore imagines one can see oneself.) But to tell the story of the dead Kane, through others, and have us approximate his experience aesthetically, is to resurrect him through the movie audience and to show us the Kane in ourselves far better than any identification with the living Kane on screen could have done.

In the same way, for example, that Kane sought during his life to dominate the "storytellers"—Thatcher, Bernstein, Leland, Susan—we seek to "dominate" them in their stories. Indeed, we almost forget that they are doing the telling as we search restlessly for knowledge and understanding of Charles Foster Kane: in a word, for possession of him. By the end of the film what knowledge and understanding we have gained have got us nowhere, really, and we remain untouched. Like Kane on his deathbed. The filmmakers have ensured that. Unlike Kane, however, we know this, or we can admit it to ourselves upon reflection.

Kane's "flaw," as I have suggested, was that he did not, or could not, reflect on or criticize himself. The "flaw" of his "storytellers"—each of whom, apart from the dead Thatcher, is isolated from the others in the narrative present—is that not one of them can see himself in Kane. Each thinks that he or she has the answer



to the riddle of Charles Foster Kane, but not one has the answer to his or her own problems; not one appears self-critical, in other words. (Even Bernstein, who appears to be the most successful and happy of the “storytellers,” has reason to be self-critical: for he seems to have devoted his life to Mr. Kane—his former boss’s portrait dwarfs him in his own office—and now that life is made up of distant memories of girls in white dresses, of a life of his own with a woman that was never to be.) On reflection, we in the audience do see ourselves in Kane, and we separate ourselves from him. We are left to know and love ourselves before we can attempt to know and love another person—and ask for love in return—or before we try to conquer the world of business, politics, or the arts.



## 21. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles

This is the triumph of *Citizen Kane* as art: we are enabled by its imitation of a subjective experience, as opposed to an objective action, to reflect on ourselves in a way that no character in the film reflects on himself. The characters in the movie *assert*; we *reflect*. Such art falls, finally, somewhere between pathos and tragedy. It does not make a pathetic figure tragic, but, ironically, it helps him to give us what tragedy at its best gives us: knowledge of ourselves. The character thus, in a sense, gets to do more than simply play out his days pathetically, and we get to do more than just feel sorry for him.

*Citizen Kane*’s technical daring, I think, pales beside its thematic daring in treating a pathetic figure so. The case for that technical daring is summed up by Peter Cowie:

*Citizen Kane* is of primary importance in the history of cinema because of the audacity and virtuosity of Welles's technique, and because of the influence that the style was to exert on films in all parts of the world for the next two decades. . . . [Welles's] brilliance stems from his ability to synthesize and harmonize all possible stylistic methods into a coherent instrument for telling his story. (267)

Jorge Luis Borges, writing in 1945, seems to endorse Cowie's view, albeit negatively, when he says, "I dare predict . . . that *Citizen Kane* will endure in the same way certain films of Griffith or of Pudovkin 'endure': no one denies their historic value but no one sees them again. It suffers from grossness, pedantry, dullness" (in Gottesman, *Focus on Citizen Kane*, 128).

*Citizen Kane* has endured, of course, in a different way: people see it all the time. In my view, that is because it "fascinates" in the manner I describe in this essay. If technical daring were all that *Citizen Kane* had going for it, it would indeed have suffered by now the fate of, say, Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915): to be studied in film classes for its advances in cinematic technique, yet to be snickered at in public screenings for its naïveté of theme and primitiveness of characterization.



## 22. *Citizen Kane* (1941), dir. Orson Welles

It is high time, then, that critics stopped overpraising *Citizen Kane* for its brilliant technique, on the one hand, and castigating the film for its supposedly shallow theme and protagonist in the service of all that technique, on the other. *Citizen Kane* represents a different kind of film art, and one for which it still cannot be said, over seven decades after its making, that a sufficient critical

language exists. Made only four years before the dropping of the first atomic bomb, *Citizen Kane* is perhaps a new film art for a new era and one whose lead more and more movie directors may take as they realize that fewer and fewer people in this, the continuing age of narcissism, are reflective or self-critical. Why? Because, especially in the West, human beings have retreated into themselves in the face of the violence, confusion, and even madness of modern existence; they have become obsessed with self rather than confront a world seemingly without order, purpose, or reason. As a result, characters that reflective, self-critical, even potentially tragic, are not as depictable as they once were.

There was a time when a Charles Foster Kane was an anomaly in life as in art. Today, I suspect, he is the norm, in both public and private spheres of existence as well as in so much art that approvingly holds a mirror up to the bourgeoisie: incapable of love, untrusting, and monstrously ambitious. *Citizen Kane* has become, over the last seventy to seventy-five years, like many citizens of the United States and other Western countries. When Welles and Mankiewicz made their film, I have argued, they were raising a pathetic figure from the grave, as it were, and attempting through their narrative method to give his movie audience *more* than the experience of pathos. Contemporary audiences, however, may not be capable of anything but admiration, even envy, of Kane, and they may be able to express nothing more than a paradoxical mixture of regret and pleasure at his ill fortune.

A movie director who wanted to reach such viewers might, in his or her film, resurrect a tragic figure and attempt, through a narrative method similar to *Citizen Kane's*, to make this character's audience conscious of its own pathos. We have yet to see such a picture, of course, and we may never, for, as Edmund declares in the final scene of *King Lear* (1606), "Men are as the time is"—and that includes, along with everybody else, the film directors of the self-besotted twenty-first century.

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## Federico Fellini's *I vitelloni*

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In the most impressive phase of his career (from *Variety Lights* [1950] through *8½* [1963]), Federico Fellini (1920-93) was, above all, an observer, constructing his films through juxtaposition: that is, through setting details of reconstructed reality side-by-side to point up a common denominator, or (more often) to expose the ironic relationship between unlike things. This method of reconstruction is the one associated with Italian neorealism, which Fellini himself defined in a 1971 interview with Charles Thomas Samuels as “the opposite of manufactured effects, of the laws of dramaturgy, spectacle, even of cinematography” (126)—in other words, the presentation of the world in as natural a manner as possible, without arranging things in order to create plots or entertainments.

What distinguishes Fellini from the neorealists, however, is an insistence on the primary force of human imagination. His characters are not solely motivated by externals—the theft of a bicycle, social indifference, child and elderly abandonment or neglect—as Vittorio De Sica’s were. Nor, like Ermanno Olmi, does Fellini invert neorealism by studying only the human accommodation to such external circumstances. Instead, he denies the pure externality of events, choosing instead to show that reality and imagination interpenetrate. Hence Fellini’s characters never face a fact without dressing it up: if, as in *I vitelloni* (1953), they are in an empty piazza during the small hours of the night, they actively deny the implication that all human activities must pause; if, as in *The Nights of Cabiria* (1957), they are stepping in place on what amounts to a treadmill, they are nonetheless always on parade, decked out and boisterous. Continually awaiting an answer to, or a satisfaction of, their deepest needs, they are nonetheless always disappointed; what we see of them may literally cease at film’s end, but in fact they never reach their final destination.

Essential stasis is thus crucial to Fellini’s world. Conventional dramaturgy, by contrast, exalts the will: characters want something; they reach out for it; and they get it or don’t get it. Sometimes they fail, or succeed, because of circumstances; sometimes they do so because of another character. Whatever the case, their fate becomes established in a conflict that peaks in a climax, after which there is a *dénouement*. But such strategies Fellini either rejects or transforms. Like other directors who wish to wean the cinema from its addiction to popular fiction and melodrama, he tries to inject the bracing truth that, from start to finish, life isn’t very dramatic after all.

Among the neorealists, it’s true, episodic structure and open endings are also fundamental strategies. Yet the scenarios of Cesare Zavattini do not avoid narrative causality and suspense; and, although Olmi’s characters seem to wander in and out of unconnected experiences, they too eventually reach a turning point, so that in retrospect their wanderings appear to conform to a dramatic pattern. At his

most characteristic, Fellini eliminates such remnants of conventional dramaturgy. Scenes are related in his films, not by causality or in order to create a crisis, but as illustrations of a state of being. At his best, Fellini shows us people in several versions of hopefulness, which, because it is unchanging and unassuageable, can achieve only the resolution of the *spectator's* understanding.

This constancy, rather than any outer achievement or inner alteration, is Fellini's typical subject; and he wants us to find it both deplorable and marvelous. Not simply for defying dramaturgical artifice or for showing that perception shapes experience does Fellini deserve to be credited with having deepened cinematic realism, however. His films are especially realistic in precluding unequivocal judgment. Life, Fellini intimates, is not dramatic but repetitious, not external but mediated by the imagination, and neither to be admired nor despised. And not wanting his audience to be partisan, he must simultaneously put us outside his characters to show their errors and inside them so that we do not dismiss them as fools. This double exposure, if you will—a subjective view laid over the objective—is the Fellinian touch that first signals the presence of a personal and incisive refinement of realism.

For example, his first film, *Variety Lights*, tells of a provincial girl who takes up with a tacky vaudeville troupe. Because she unscrupulously exploits its leading comedian to further her career, she inspires a contempt that throws our sympathy to the vaudevillians, who would otherwise seem ludicrous. The resulting balance between satire and sympathy characterizes Fellini at his best. This balance certainly characterizes his best films: *The White Sheik* (1952), a comedy about *fumetti* (magazines telling romantic stories in photo-strip form, or a kind of live action), and *I vitelloni*, his picture about the fantasies of some small-town loafers. In each case, Fellini mocks the phony dreams that seduce his simpletons, while at the same time providing poignant evidence that their barren lives might mistake tinsel for gold.

But between *I vitelloni* and Fellini's next feature a shift occurred. With *La strada* (1954), Fellini begins to imagine the star-struck dupe as a divine innocent and the theatrical antagonist as a downright villain. This melodramatic perspective suits a parable like *La strada*, but it wrecks *Il bidone* (*The Swindle*, 1955) and almost wrecks *The Nights of Cabiria*. By the time he makes *La dolce vita* (1969), Fellini sees in glamour nothing more than corruption; his new moralism, however, is oddly indistinguishable from prurience. Passing over the problematic 8½, we find Fellini's prurience gone wild in *Juliet of the Spirits* (1965), such that the theatricalism which was his former subject here becomes a lurid method. And from the empty circus of *Juliet*, it was but a short step to the freak show of *Fellini Satyricon* (1969).

Preferring to praise Fellini, not to bury him, I concentrate here on *I vitelloni*, the film often cited as his masterpiece. This picture clearly exemplifies Fellini's



methods, though, in terms of actual technique, it may be the least “Felliniesque” of his major films. It makes far less use, for example, of the odd foreshortenings, the unexpected close-ups, the expert manipulation of relations between foreground and background that came to form so much a part of Fellini’s expressive vocabulary; and there are fewer of the gargoyles and dreamlike or surreal characters that populate his most recognizable work. In parts of *I vitelloni* the camerawork (by the three-man team of Carlo Carlini, Otello Martelli, and Luciano Trasatti) itself is uncharacteristically languid, as in the early scenes where the character of Fausto prepares to leave his father’s house after learning that his girlfriend Sandra is pregnant.

A bit of regional slang, literally “the big slabs of veal” but roughly translated as “the overgrown calves,” the title *I vitelloni* designates five superannuated juveniles whose antics comprise a model of provincial stagnation. All the *vitelloni* recognize that they should leave their hometown of Pesaro, but each prefers to gaze carelessly on its arid slopes, dreaming of green fields. They talk of girls and of honeymoons in Africa, but only one of them marries; and Fausto has to be beaten into fulfilling a spousal role too lightly assumed. The others do not even come *this* close to maturity. Leopoldo dreams of becoming a playwright at the same time as he pointlessly flirts with the maid next door. Alberto upbraids his sister for trysting with a married man and thus worrying their mother, yet he lives off the object of his sermons. Riccardo wants to be a singer, but not even fervently enough to earn him a large place in *I vitelloni*. Moraldo, for his part, simply stands by and watches his friends’ antics.



### 23. *I vitelloni* (1953), dir. Federico Fellini

What do the friends do? Little that is either impressive in itself or rendered so by dramatic arrangement. Most of the scenes concern Fausto’s shotgun wedding to Sandra, the job (in a religious statuary shop, a typical Fellini touch of uncommon satirical depth) he takes reluctantly and then flirts away, his wife’s defection, and their subsequent reunion. This slight plot (which includes such details as Fausto’s



invitation to Sandra to applaud his feat of lowering the shutters on the shop where he works; his celebration of his sexuality by shadowboxing after getting a kiss from his wife; and his doing deep-knee bends after he makes a pass at *his boss's* wife), ending without Fausto's reform, is constantly interrupted for vignettes about the other characters, so that suspense is never allowed to build. We watch the *vitelloni* razzing a whore whom they accidentally meet in the piazza, playing pool in a café where they make feeble jokes about the waiter, going to a carnival or to the theater; and, when nothing else offers, we observe them gazing out on a wintry sea while wondering how much it would cost to get any of them to take a swim.

Such details, together with the random construction, authentic locales, and natural performances—all shot by an unobtrusive camera—make *I vitelloni* a convincing paradigm of life in a small Italian town during the postwar period. Despite its brevity, the film even has room for a host of minor characters, some of whom appear for less than a minute but manage nonetheless to give the sense of a entire world unto itself. Parents, employees, and friends flit through one another's lives and themselves engage in activities no less important than what we see—as if to imply that Fellini could follow these, too, if wanted to.

Instead he concentrates on the *vitelloni* as viewed retrospectively by an unidentified former member of the group. This character's voice-over, in addition to offering the standard expedients of commentary (temporal elision, background information, etc.), helps us to shape our response into the Fellinian “double exposure” or “double perspective” to which I referred earlier. Like the film's other non-natural device—Nino's Rota's musical score—the narration tells us to feel differently from the characters, teases us into seeing them more tenderly than they see themselves, and protects them from the derision otherwise earned by their behavior.

Masterpiece or not, *I vitelloni*, in the long dream of image and spectacle that was to become Federico Fellini's moviemaking career, occupies a nodal point. Filmed between the seemingly superficial but nonetheless brilliant *White Sheik* and his first fully characteristic work, *La strada*, *I vitelloni* marks a big step forward in Fellini's attempt to get deep into his characters' psychology. It points ahead both to the bitter social satire of *La dolce vita* and to those large canvases of personal nostalgia and artistic self-exploration, *8½* and *Amarcord* (1974). Indeed, *I vitelloni* takes the first definitive plunge into many of Fellini's dominant thematic and imagistic preoccupations: arrested development in men, marriage and infidelity, the life of provincial towns versus the cosmopolitan city, the melancholy and mystery of deserted nighttime streets, the magic of the seashore, of the movies themselves. To be sure, many of these major themes and images can be found in germinal form in *The White Sheik*, and even to some degree in *Variety Lights*. But it is in *I vitelloni* that they move from being accessories to the action to being the heart of the matter.

Moreover, *I vitelloni* hangs us on the horns of an insoluble dilemma that lives at the center of Fellini's work. That dilemma takes subtly shifting forms in his films but ultimately seems to stem from the tension, on the one hand, between childhood's sense of wonder and possibility, with its undertow of infantile dependence and decay (if the individual never grows up), and, on the other hand, adulthood's practical, realistic understanding of life's responsibilities as well as costs—an understanding that carries with it its own undertow of potential stultification, cynicism, and corruption. This tension finds its most pointed expression in the repeated images, throughout Fellini's *oeuvre*, of the callous exploitation of the mysterious, the wondrous, or the sacred by those whose overdeveloped ego or lust for power has blinded them to what is most precious in life. *I vitelloni* brings this imagery into the center of the picture for the first time.

The *vitelloni*, as I have described them, are a sort of provincial Rat Pack, living off mothers and sisters and fathers, dressing handsomely, chasing women, and idling their time away in this small seaside town apparently modeled on Fellini's hometown of Rimini. Alberto Sordi and Leopoldo Trieste, both of whom played major roles in *The White Sheik*, are outstanding here (unsurprisingly, as Alberto and Leopoldo), as is Franco Fabrizi, who as Fausto bears an eerie resemblance to the young Elvis Presley. Franco Interlenghi (Pasquale in De Sica's *Shoeshine* [1946]) plays Moraldo, the thoughtful one and the only member of the group who seriously questions the life they lead. Riccardo Fellini, the director's brother, is somewhat less defined as a character—Zeppo among the Marx Brothers, if you like.



24. *I vitelloni* (1953), dir. Federico Fellini

Against the narcissism and lassitude of the five *vitelloni* are posed the solidity and maturity of the town's older men, who have assumed, and who meet, the standard obligations of middle-class family life. But admirable as they may be, these upright citizens—unimaginative and even stolid, stuck in claustal interior settings yet somehow satisfied with their lot—are hardly made to seem a stimulating alternative. At the end of *I vitelloni*, therefore, Moraldo leaves the town's tape loop of foreclosed possibilities for another arena of possibility, in the city. And it is through Moraldo in particular that Fellini reflects the double perspective on Fausto, for Moraldo begins by romanticizing his friend but ends by repudiating him. Indeed, only in Moraldo's growing alienation from Fausto does the film have a progressive action; and, typical of Fellini, this action is one of perceptual disenchantment.

Thus, when Sandra faints after being crowned "Miss Siren" during the opening sequence of *I vitelloni*, Fellini shoots the crowd of well-wishers from her angle, making us feel that she is being undone both by the crowd and by all the excitement. However, a later glance from her brother (Moraldo) to Fausto, as the latter expresses bewilderment and the dawn of chagrin at what has happened, establishes the true cause of Sandra's collapse: the onset of pregnancy. We are ready to laugh at this discovery, but the music, with its haunting strings, keeps us from mocking Fausto. Only after the following scene, when, bludgeoned by his father into doing the "right thing," he collides with the *vitelloni*, who are howling at his predicament, can our laughter find its release.

Next, Fellini augments our amusement and, by default, our sympathy for this trapped young bull by dissolving from the laughing calves to a gaggle of tearful biddies, hypocritically concealing their own delight about the bourgeois respectability about to be inflicted on the young couple. Behind the priest officiating at the nuptial rites of the middle class, Fellini then stations a choirboy unaffectedly picking his nose. Such is the manner in which the double perspective on Fausto (and, by extension, on *petit-bourgeois* life in the Italian provinces), balancing compassion and disdain, is reflected. (That balanced perspective will disappear in Fellini's *Il bidone*, which stands out as a transmutation of the provincial *vitelloni* from harmless, middle-class parasites into hostile, ruthless con men and thieves.)



## 25. *I vitelloni* (1953), dir. Federico Fellini

Although Leopoldo and Alberto are not so prominent as Fausto in *I vitelloni*, they come to us through methods perhaps more typical of Fellini, whereby he places a character in an environment altered by his mode of perception. Unlike Fausto, on whom Moraldo provides the primary judgmental perspective, Alberto and Leopoldo must be understood almost solely through the details of their behavior, as in the scene where Leopoldo falls for the spell of the theater, only to be disillusioned when the actor he idolizes is revealed to be no more than a tawdry vaudevillian and aging queen who would seduce him. And as in the scene, as well, where Alberto, in drag, throws himself into the frenzy of a party, only to find himself hung over toward morning on an empty dance floor, where a trumpeter plays flat and Alberto dances to the bitter end with a detached *papier-mâché* figure from a carnival float. Such a method of detailing behavior also explains the otherwise seemingly gratuitous scene, interrupting the search for Sandra, in which the *vitelloni* razz a road crew and are then beaten up by the irate laborers when the

boys' car breaks down. Besides keeping us from getting too worried about Sandra's defection, this scene underlines the insult to honest work implicit in the high jinks of the *vitelloni*.

In 8½, Fellini's alter ego, the director Guido, also caught, like the five *vitelloni*, between childhood and maturity, in addition to being obsessively unfaithful to his wife and unable to endow his film-in-progress with an explainable theme or a plot with a definable shape, finally creates a great circus mandala in which everyone and everything has a place (an echo of the procession at the end of *The Nights of Cabiria*)—and which of necessity represents acceptance and inclusion, as well as a transcendence of the polarities of human existence. *I vitelloni*, filmed ten years earlier, offers no such reliable image of wholeness and affirmation. The closest it comes is the character of the station boy (also named Guido) with whom Moraldo passes time now and again during his nocturnal ramblings, and who watches Moraldo leave town at the end. It is in moments like this last one, signaled by camera placement, editing, and music, that Moraldo's character merges with the subjective, authorial consciousness of Fellini, which will become more direct and forceful in the later Fellini films. (In fact, at the end of the film, when Moraldo is saying good-bye to the station boy from the train, Interlenghi's voice is dubbed by Fellini himself. Moraldo's character was to have been continued in the scripted, but never filmed, *Moraldo in città* (*Moraldo in the City*), and a character similar to him gets off the train at the beginning of *Roma* [1972].)

Moraldo's departure at the conclusion of *I vitelloni* is neither happy nor sad because what he leaves behind is ambiguous. Fellini makes this ambiguity clear, as Moraldo's train pulls out and he looks back at what he is leaving, by cutting to a series of shots—all shaking as if seen from the train, whose movements are heard on the soundtrack—of the *vitelloni* asleep. Visualizing what is in Moraldo's mind, these shots suggest both the stagnancy of the other boys' lives and their enviable comfort to someone departing for the unknown. Incurably somnolent, the *vitelloni* are also stable in their sleep. Sleep is their life; they wake to dream. And the film's rhythm, like that of all Fellini's major films, is an oscillation between such soporific reality and the clamor of delusion.

It is worth remembering, however, that *I vitelloni* ends not on the image of Moraldo leaving amid the glimpses of the sleeping *vitelloni*, but on the station boy walking down the tracks, back toward town. Young Guido has a simple relation to his work, and, most importantly, seems to accept life as a gift and a grace. "Are you happy?" Moraldo asks him at one point, and the boy responds, "Why not?" This is the stance that Fellini reserved for some of the characters he plainly loved the most: the Fool in *La strada*; Cabiria in *The Nights of Cabiria*, shrugging and smiling into the camera as she joins the procession at the end; Guido in 8½, summoning everyone into the moving circle at the film's conclusion.



## 26. *I vitelloni* (1953), dir. Federico Fellini

*I vitelloni* is full of its own subtle and beautifully achieved dramatic, as well as comic, moments: Alberto standing next to Fausto and blocking Sandra as they pose for the wedding photo; Leopoldo at the restaurant, in a narcissistic trance, reading his cliché-laden play to the aging actor and lecher Natali, as the latter gorges himself and the *vitelloni* flirt with the female members of his vaudeville troupe; the hilarious mixture in the troupe's performance itself of bathetic sentimentality, military bluster, and vulgar display. Throughout, Nino Rota's music strikes its own characteristic balance between calculated vulgarity and aching nostalgia. A representative, marvelously juxtaposed segment makes excellent use of that music: the segue from the frenetic carnival celebration, in which the band plays a breakneck version of the old pop song "Yes, Sir, That's My Baby" (Rota liked this song and used it again in *La dolce vita*), to the scene after the ball, where a couple of *vitelloni* and their partners are still dancing amid the tatters of the party to a solitary trumpeter playing the same tune, moving it up in key a half-step each time, until finally the badly soused Alberto shouts at him to stop.

One of the film's most important sequences finds Fausto convincing Moraldo to help him steal the statue of an angel from his former employer's shop. After they do so, the two of them try unsuccessfully to sell it at a convent and then at a monastery before entrusting it to the idiot fisherman Giudizio for safekeeping overnight. Giudizio (the name means "judgment"), alone with the statue after toting it around all day, sets it up on a mound outside his hovel and regards it in awe, doffing his cap and stroking the statue's arm and hair. This is a touching and even ingenious moment, one that finds its echo in most of Fellini's subsequent films—above all in *La strada*, which is a sort of extended fugue on the subject. For we are made to realize by Giudizio's behavior that the angel isn't



only saleable guilt. His worship of the angel, together with the graceful tracking of Fellini's camera and the delicacy of Rota's music, works to make the statue seem as beautiful to us as it is to the village idiot and thus, through its very object presence, a severe indictment of Fausto's venality and lack of imagination.

The masks of carnival work in a roughly reverse manner. Indeed, much of the wistfully tragic cadence of the film derives from the despair behind the merry masks of the *vitelloni*, a rhetorical figure actualized in the town's frenzied carnival celebration. For this Dionysian event is the perfect visual and rhythmic representation of misdirected energy—the very kind, it is hinted, that led to the twisted, inebriated alienation, neurotic sexual frustration, and adolescently-inspired Fascist ideology of Italian society before World War II, after it, and well on into the 1950s. Alberto's own drag costume and enormous mask, with its features set into a grotesque, scream-like pose, are themselves indications that farcical anarchy and psychological anguish are never too far from each other.

Among its other virtues, *I vitelloni* is also the first of Fellini's films to use the open-ended form that would mark his major work from then on. As I have already suggested, Fellini was allergic to endings that sum things up too neatly, or that resolve in a definitive way the tensions set up in a film. To this end, he once remarked, "Our duty as storytellers is to take people to the station. There each person will choose his or her own train. But we must at least get them to the station, to a point of departure" (Fellini quoted in Cardullo, 111). This is a striking image, yet one foreign to many popular storytellers: the ending of a story seen not as a final arrival but instead as an anticipated departure.

*I vitelloni*, of course, takes us literally to the station at its conclusion, with Moraldo's departure from his provincial hometown. But on a deep level the film was Fellini's point of departure, too—the beginning of his important work as a director, the place where he got serious about his art. And, as he made clear at the end of *Intervista* (1987), the only thing that really made him happy was his work, his life in art. The end of any project for Fellini was therefore a kind of death, overcome only at the moment when he was ready to begin anew, like carnival every spring—to try to get it right one more, if not one last, time.

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## Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*

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The worldly life of Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63) was, like that of many another artist, very worldly. This is especially true of film artists, for no one can live in a movie environment as in a Buddhist monastery. And no film director is likely to get the chance to achieve such “purity” as Ozu’s (more on this term later) unless he can deal with the rather less pure circumstances that surround the making of all films.

Ozu entered films as an assistant in 1923, when he was twenty years old, assigned to a director of light comedy. He had been born in Tokyo but moved away with his mother while quite young. His father had remained in Tokyo to manage the family business, so Ozu grew up virtually fatherless—an interesting fact in light of the centrality of father figures in his later films. Sent to a boarding school, he did badly and was expelled. When he was in a prefectural (or public) middle school, he was dispatched to the city of Kobo to apply to a good high school. Instead Ozu went to a movie. He soon saw other films, by Thomas Ince and Rex Ingram, and later he said that, if he had not seen them, he might never have chosen the film profession.

But he did choose it, and, with the help of a friend of his father’s, he got his first job. Ozu remained an assistant for four years. He had chances to get ahead, but confessed subsequently, “The real truth is that I didn’t want to. As an assistant I could drink all I wanted and spend my time talking. Still, my friends told me to go and try, and finally orders came through making me a full director.” There is no evidence that Ozu gave up drinking and talking, but there’s plenty of evidence that he soon got a reputation for hard work.

In 1927 he made his first film. He wrote the script with Kogo Noda, with whom he also wrote the script of *Tokyo Story* in 1953, as well as many other scripts. Most of Ozu’s early pictures were light comedies, like the very first movie he worked on as an assistant. I have no intention, though, of sketching his whole career for more than the obvious reasons: some of the early films have disappeared, and the remaining ones have not all been available in the United States. In 1982 the Japan Society of New York showed the thirty-two extant feature films (out of the fifty-four Ozu directed, thirty-four of which were silents made before 1936), but few of them were subsequently released to a wider public. Our Ozu, the Ozu we know well, is mostly the latter Ozu, of such films, in addition to *Tokyo Story*, as *An Autumn Afternoon* (1962), *Floating Weeds* (1959), and *Late Spring* (1949). This is not an unbearable fate. Late Ozu would not exist without the experience that preceded it, it’s true; but what we have is a treasury.

That treasury is one of at least two that Japanese cinema has bequeathed to us, the other being from Akira Kurosawa. Even as, in his own nation, Kurosawa is called the most Western of Japanese directors, Ozu is called the most Japanese of filmmakers by his countrymen, and an American like me can see at least a little bit of why this is so. But such a comment is a defining, not a limiting one. (Who, after all, was more Swedish a filmmaker than Ingmar Bergman?) Kurosawa, a fine artist, is an immediately exciting director; Ozu, a fine artist, is not. Kurosawa is essentially a dramatist, Ozu a lyric poet whose lyrics swell quietly into the epic.

The films of Ozu's last period, the ones I know best, tend toward an *adagio* tempo, and are crystallized in loving but austere simplicity. His method is one of non-drama, but not in any prosy, naturalistic, flattened sense. He believes, along with many Japanese painters and draftsmen, that if you select the right details—including words—and present them realistically, you have created an abstraction that signifies a great deal more than detailed realism. The drama, for Ozu, is in life itself, and his task is therefore not to contrive but to reveal. Indeed, everything in an Ozu film derives from his utter subscription to a view of life as infinitely sacred and of art as the most sacred exercise in life—one whose purpose is not to account for or explain life's sacredness, but to document it. He serves, then, rather than making anything serve him.

Around 1930, at about the time that Chishu Ryu emerged as a principal actor for him, Ozu began to become the Ozu we now know, a serious director chiefly interested in Japanese family life, in middle-class existence. I underscore that the emergence of Ryu coincided with this artistic deepening in Ozu; one may infer here that opportunity in this instance evoked ambition. I underscore also that Ozu worked through most of his career with three close colleagues: Ryu, the aforementioned Kogo Noda, and Yuharu Atsuta. Teams of this kind have appeared from time to time in film history and have usually produced superior results: Ozu's "team" is no exception.

Ryu himself appeared in every one of Ozu's fifty-four films, at first in small parts and eventually in many leading roles, including the father in *Tokyo Story*. From 1941 (after a stretch of military service) Ozu had Atsuta as his camera self, or, as Atsuta put it in 1985, as "the caretaker of the camera"; and Atsuta was to serve as Ozu's cameraman on a dozen films. It was he who designed the short tripod to make the camera usable at a height of three feet, a device that facilitated the now familiar *tatami* shot—a hallmark of Ozu films—the perspective, in medium-to-full range (rarely in close or from afar), of a Japanese seated on a household mat. From the beginning, Ozu also had Noda as a script collaborator. In 1964, Ryu said of this writing collaboration

that “Mr. Ozu looked happiest when he was engaged in writing a scenario with Mr. Kogo Noda . . . By the time he had finished writing a script, he had already made up every image in every shot. . . . The words were so polished that he would never allow us a single mistake in the speaking of them” (quoted in Desser, 152). Other good directors often work otherwise. With Ozu, however, the result is not mechanical execution of a blueprint but the fulfillment of aesthetic design.

In his own right Chishu Ryu has an extraordinary place in Ozu’s *oeuvre*. He became, one could say, the vicar on screen for Ozu. According to some critics, this is true in some of the earlier films in the strictly biographical sense; and it continued, in the later films, in the psychological and spiritual sense. Those who know all the available films have said that the so-called Ozu feeling would have been impossible without the actor who played what became known as the Ozu role. Ryu was, of course, aware of this. He said in 1958, “Today I cannot think of my own identity without thinking of him. I heard that Ozu once said, ‘Ryu is not a skillful actor—and that is why I use him.’ And that is very true” (quoted in Richie, 1974: 147). This also from Ryu—who was in fact close in age to Ozu—in 1985: “Our relationship was always that of teacher and student, father and son. . . . From the beginning to the end I was to learn from him” (quoted in Kauffmann, 183).

I don’t take either of Ryu’s two statements as an instance of modesty but of affinity. Other directors have used personal vicars on the screen: for example, the young Truffaut and Jean-Pierre Léaud. Other directors, too, have wanted actors who were not interested in virtuosity—Bresson, for prime example. But it is unique that a director should so long have used an exceptionally talented (if “unskillful,” which I take to mean uncalculating or unhistrionic) actor who was quite willing, with all the modesty possible, to put that talent at the director’s disposal. The result is not subordination but self-expression—of Ozu’s self as well as Ryu’s. And I know of no better instance of this than *Tokyo Story*, which is the most successful of Ozu’s four late films to which I have referred (all of which have beauty). When it was made, Ozu was fifty years old and Ryu forty-seven. Ozu, who never married, had been exploring, continued artistically to explore, the experience of an older husband and father, to feed into his films what he had observed and imagined about such men; and Ryu, some twenty years younger than such a character, was again the consummating yet humble vicar of the exploration.

For reasons I hope to make clear, I now synopsise *Tokyo Story*. This is easy to do because, although it is a film of well over two hours, it does not have a complex narrative. Instead, the reader may find it hard to believe that

a wonderful work of art could be made from this story. A husband and wife in their late sixties live in a small town called Onomichi on the southern coast of Japan with their unmarried daughter, a schoolteacher. The couple decide to visit their two married children and *their* children in Tokyo; during their visit, they also intend to see their widowed daughter-in-law, whose husband was killed in the war eight years before. En route, moreover, mother and father will stop off to see a younger son who lives in Osaka. The couple proceed to visit their children and daughter-in-law, a visit that is pleasant enough but, at least with their own children, a bit uncomfortable—forced in feeling, if you will. On the way home, the old woman falls sick and has to stop at her son's home in Osaka. When she and her husband at last get home, she sickens further. The family is summoned. The old woman dies. After the funeral service, the family leaves; the single daughter goes off to her school; and the old man is left alone. Thus does *Tokyo Story* end.

To repeat: this apparently slender material makes a film of two hours and twenty minutes. It also makes a film that encompasses so much of the viewer's life that you are convinced you have been in the presence of someone who knew you very well. Students of mine were asked recently to write papers on what they know about Chaplin. One of them began, "I don't know how much I know about Chaplin, but he certainly knows a lot about me." This seems to me one excellent definition of superior art, and it also applies to Yasujiro Ozu. As for his Asian or Eastern remoteness, the most obvious and fundamentally truest point about Ozu is that by being "most Japanese" in his art, he was simultaneously being most universal.

That art begins with the script. Obviously, if an experienced director and his equally experienced collaborator decide on the script I have synopsisized—a script with no vivid or sustained dramatic conflict, only a series of incidents—they have something in mind other than conventional drama. A lesser director would have thought: "Now that I have 'located' the components of my film and its movement—the trip to Tokyo—what complications can I devise to keep things interesting?" Ozu, with Noda, thinks only: "What are these lives like? Really like?" And by holding to human truth, much more than to dramatic naturalism, he gives us a process of mutual discovery, the characters' and our own. This is an act of aesthetic daring—to choose such a structure for a film—daring that comes not from ego but, in a way, from the absence of ego, of authorial tampering, intrusion, or contrivance. The daring is to make what might be called an invisible film, whose import, as with any other movie, is in what we see and hear but is not immediately disclosed (or better, "dramatized"), in *Tokyo Story*, by what we see and hear.



## 27. *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Yasujiro Ozu

To achieve this, Ozu naturally had to have the understanding from the start of Kogo Noda. He also had to have the camera of Yuharu Atsuta, whose presence is exactly what it ought to be: unnoticeable. We *discern* what happens; we don't float our way to it through gorgeous cinematography. And Ozu's three most important actors here seem to have blossomed out of the original idea into full-blown, corporeal beings. Bent, faintly ludicrous, somewhat egocentric, Chishu Ryu is nonetheless truly dignified by his character's age, and, by some magical act of imaginative transformation, he manages to act with an old man's very bones. (His character, incidentally, has a partiality for drink.) Chieko Higashiyama, his wife, has a plain, even homely face that, as we see more and more of her, becomes more and more beautiful; like Eleanor Roosevelt's face, that is, Higashiyama's becomes *facially* beautiful as her spirit becomes manifest. Tall, ungainly, and humane, Setsuko Hara, the daughter-in-law, herself manages to give us tenderness without sugar, loneliness without self-pity. These, then, are just some of the instrumentalities that give this film its exquisite cinematic texture.

From the beginning, Ozu sets his tempo, which, again, is an *adagio*, and which is dictated by his intent. *Tokyo Story* opens with three shots: a ship passing; children passing on their way to school; and a train passing. The operative image of course is "passing"—the idea of passage, in time as in life. Then we see the old couple quietly packing their bags for the trip to Tokyo. They are seated on the floor of their home, so within seconds or so of the start, we get the film's first *tatami* shot. Much of the subsequent film is seen from this "national" viewpoint, when

the characters are erect as well as when they are sitting: in such compositions as the stout old woman and her little grandson standing silhouetted on a hilltop; the old couple seated on a curved sea wall at a beach outside Tokyo, seen from behind, tiny but together against the visibly immense, even illimitable sea, and knowing they will soon face other, familial immensities; or the shot in which the camera moves slowly past the side of a pavilion in a Tokyo park until, around the corner, we see, again from behind, the old couple seated, alone on a ledge, eating their lunch. These are all moments of deep and inexplicable poignancy, such simple and ordinary sights that, as Tolstoy might have said, they cannot help but be staggeringly important.

Because of these moments, *because* they are like stations on an archetypal pilgrimage, I have often wondered about the *tatami* shot—about its double meaning. For Japanese viewers, who were Ozu's prime consideration, it clearly has the embrace of the familiar; for them it is almost essential for credibility, let us say. For foreign viewers like me, what has come in the West to be known as the "Ozu shot" is an adventure: not into something wild and strange but into a different species of ordinariness. Through the power of the film medium, this director forces us non-Japanese into the physicality of Japanese life, into a view of existence that is part and parcel of decorum and relationships: the eye-level of a person seated on the floor. I am not asserting that sitting on a *tatami* mat explains Japanese civilization (though it is the immobile position of watchful repose from which one sees the Noh drama; from which one partakes of the tea ceremony; and in which the *haiku* master sits in silence and only occasionally reaches essence, in his poetry, through extreme simplification or distillation). I do maintain, however, that the *tatami* shot has a subtly implosive effect on the Western mind, especially when we remember that it has no such effect on the Japanese mind. That effect is at once humbling and empowering. It's as if Ozu were saying, "These are all tiny atoms I am showing you, from your own 'tiny' position sitting on the floor. Yet in any one of them, enlarged as they are on the screen, may be found the entire universe."

Let me move now to Ozu's treatment of time, as opposed to his positioning of the camera in space. One side of the old couple's living room is a wide window that opens onto the street. A neighbor passes during the brief opening sequence, stops, chats through the window, and promises to look after their house while they are away. Then cut to Tokyo. The cut is sharp, for in the 1930s Ozu gave up dissolves. Eventually, he declared, "A dissolve is a handy thing, but it's not interesting. . . . Generally overlaps and fades aren't part of cinematic grammar—they are only attributes of the camera" (quoted in Roud, 744). *Tokyo Story* has no overlaps and almost no fades (there's one on the old man at a certain point, and, because of its rarity in Ozu's *oeuvre*, the fade adds an elegiac texture to this character's plight)—a seeming paradox in a film that has as one of its themes the passage of time.



Ozu thus seems to be telling us what we should already know: that time is a mortal invention. Mortality may mark the progress and end of existence, but time for its part does not move: people do. At any given moment—an idea that itself is a human invention—there are children and parents and grandparents and dying people as well as newborn ones. At any other given moment, there is the same assortment, yet with the names changed. For time, as Heraclitus told us, is a stream into which we cannot step twice. Unlike humans, that is, time is constant, like the sea that Ozu's old couple sit down to observe. The *movement* of time is something that they (and we along with them) invent as they watch the sea simply be, in all its permanency, even as we invent such a movement as we watch the static long takes that comprise much of this film.

In Tokyo we are first at the home of the couple's son, a physician, who has two sons of his own from marriage. The old folks arrive and are greeted, and quickly the atmosphere is established of people who are inseparably bound to one another—but by bonds deeper than affection. In fact, very little affection is manifested. The same is true with their other daughter, a beautician, with whose family they stay later. We see the pouting of the doctor's older boy because he has to give up his room to his grandparents; we see his younger brother's own reluctance to be near them; the old couple learn that their doctor-son is not quite the success, nor quite the man, they had imagined; and they also learn that their married daughter has been coarsened into a penny-biting, suspicious shopkeeper who is stingy even with her parents' dinner.

After these trivia have gone on for a while, and more like them, with the old folks moving through such incidents like well-meaning disturbers of family peace, a spine-chilling realization comes to us: Ozu is not going to dramatize *anything* in this film; what we see is what he means. What begins slowly to distinguish *Tokyo Story* from domestic drama, then, is precisely that it is *not* drama. It focuses on the beings of human beings, not on the artificialities or arrangements of plot. Ozu believes that his characters' wishes, responses, concealments, frustrations, and foibles are themselves more gripping, more unhistorically engrossing, than anything that could be carpentered, if only the artist who presents them is fundamentally free of judgment, reveres the complications of existence, and interferes in the motions of the lives before him (and us) only enough, and with enough skill, so as to make those motions seem to flow unimpeded.

This is a tremendous idea, and it raises the subject of scale. For everything in the film is calibrated with such refinement that feelings are always restrained but never lost—so much so that when near the end, after his wife's death, the old man gives his widowed daughter-in-law the old woman's watch as a keepsake and the girl cries quietly, the effect is of a tremendous emotional climax. As it turns out, the warmest of the young people whom the old couple see in Tokyo is just this woman: their dead son's wife. (Their own children ship them off to the nearby

seaside resort of Atami for a few days, ostensibly as a holiday but really just to get rid of them for a while.) His parents themselves understand that their late son was a difficult person to live with and not the most admirable of fellows; therefore they urge the still-young widow to remarry and not to follow the usual custom of remaining a widow.



## 28. *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Yasujiro Ozu

Many have noted the symmetries—formal, narrative, thematic—in *Tokyo Story*, and some comment on them seems apt at this point. Such symmetries are important to Ozu but never become tiresome. For example, two pairs of sandals outside a hotel bedroom door, precisely placed, show that two people, en route through their lives together, are spending this particular night behind that door. On a larger scale, Ozu balances sequences. To wit: at the start, the parents go up to Tokyo to visit their children; at the end, the children come down to Onomichi to see their parents. The hometown neighbor who stops at the window in the beginning, to wish the old couple *bon voyage*, passes the same window at the close and consoles the bereaved old man.

Perhaps most important among these symmetries is the following: in Tokyo, the old woman and the widowed daughter-in-law have a scene alone together, a very moving one in which the old woman gives the younger a gift and spends the night in her small apartment (on her dead son's marital bed, next to his widow), while the old man is out drinking with some friends from the past. At the conclusion of the film, it is then the old man who has the scene alone with the daughter-in-law, in which he gives her the gift of his dead wife's watch and tells her that the old woman said her night in the little apartment was her happiest time in Tokyo. The

very last shot of *Tokyo Story*, like the first, is a passing ship.

But such symmetries can hardly be taken as explanations in themselves, as symbols of the film's intent. Like the symmetries in the novels of Jane Austen or Charles Dickens, they almost seem, partly on account of their very number, to be the artist's way of warning us against symmetries—of telling us that experience abounds in symmetries but they do not by any means therefore illuminate the ambiguities and darkness that lie beneath them. Note, too, the signs of Americanization in the film: the box of soap flakes (Rinso), the baseball uniform hanging on a clothesline, the Stephen Foster tune to which the schoolteacher-daughter's class of children sings Japanese words. These repeated motifs, like the aforementioned symmetries, themselves appear secondary: unavoidable, perhaps, but not as a result proof that *Tokyo Story* is a lament about the postwar changes in Japanese culture under the pressure of Allied occupation.

Much more pertinent are the visual images of passage to which I referred earlier, and which buttress the idea of life's passing, with all the ache and (if we admit it) the relief that this implies. Out of the loins of these two old people whom we see sleeping peacefully side by side came the children who are now turned away from them, and we know that it will happen to the children themselves, with their children. The old couple know it, too, yet, without saying so, are content to have had what they have had and to have been part of the whole familial process. Still, even in this instance, Ozu may be saying no more than that wistfulness about passage—time's passage, life's passing—is only a human construct, and for this reason only human vanity, to which nature itself, in all its force and facticity, is oblivious.

This brings me to Ozu's use of space, not in its own existence as a fact and force of nature, but as a subjective experience. Space, for Ozu, is neither décor nor setting: it is what his characters see and pass through, have passed through, will pass through. Many have noted, for example, that he often begins a shot before the characters enter and holds it after they leave (in what the French call *temps mort*, or "dead time"). But Ozu does this not so much to suggest that the world, imperturbable, surrounds the perturbations of its inhabitants, as nearly to prove that the place in question has been brought into existence by the expectation and fact of people's entry into or visit to it—just as a composer's rests or held chords seem to have been brought into being by the expectation and fact of the musical notes that surround them.

Michelangelo Antonioni himself often, and beautifully, integrated environment with characterization, in order to show his characters as in part the products or result of their world. With Ozu, however, I think that something like the reverse is true: everything we see is determined by an intense, personal reaction to the idea of space. Rooms, for instance, seem just large enough in Tokyo to accommodate the people and the objects which they, the people, have brought there to fill the

space further. It is thus that boundary, sheer rectilinear boundary, reveals itself as the quintessential mode of Japanese structure: of rooms, of doorways, of corridors, all of them placed there by human beings.

Further evidence of this is represented by the fact that sometimes Ozu even gives us a shot of a room or hallway we recognize but which has nothing to do with the preceding scene or the one to follow. Still, men and women created that room or hallway, and they have passed through it, will pass through it. Often in *Tokyo Story* we see such men and women from a distance, people who have nothing to do with the events we are following—yet people who, through their own very being on a street or in a corridor beyond, help to define or delimit space for the characters in the foreground as well as for themselves, in the background. In this way Ozu tells us that, around and among his people, is the physical world as they, and others, have organized it. If in the process order has been brought out of chaos in the environment, external order as these Japanese conceive it, it is at least a palliative for the internal disorder, or inner mystery, that they (and we) cannot master.



## 29. *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Yasujiro Ozu

The film itself does not pretend to master that mystery, either. Indeed, as in the case of the symmetries I have already cited, Ozu seems to be warning us against understanding *Tokyo Story* too quickly. Take the scene quite near the end in which the schoolteacher-daughter and the young widow say goodbye. “Isn’t life disappointing, though?” the teacher says, and the other woman agrees. But this exchange is much too easily ironic to be taken as the point of the picture; it could not represent Ozu’s whole view. In this film we see parents disappointed in their children, it’s true; but we also see children disappointed in each other and with themselves. Still, disappointment in life is no more true than anything else in life; and for that which is other than life, human or otherwise, we can say nothing. So the conclusion of “disappointment” is simply too small for *Tokyo Story*.

Let me elaborate. No such handy consolation as disappointment will serve, for life may be disappointing, but it is also joyous, bitter, exhilarating, disgusting, unbearable, and inestimably precious, among other qualities, and it is all these things for everyone in the course of existence. And at the moment when one of these qualities is present, it is unshakably true—only to be supplanted because no one attribute of life is more unshakably true than another. In other words, everything is true, just as no one thing is wholly or solely true. It is this view of the equivalence of responses, the conviction that no response is any more or less true than any other, the knowledge that sorrow is as undependable as ecstasy as a summary emotion, which *Tokyo Story* moves toward.



### 30. *Tokyo Story* (1953), dir. Yasujiro Ozu

The true point of *Tokyo Story*, then, the only point large enough for it, is that it has no point—no quotable motto or moral to tag it with. A fine artist at the height of his powers has made a film that avoids such neat answers; but, like life, Ozu scatters deceptive answers along the way as he proceeds to non-resolution. If I had to choose one word to describe his method, it would be “purity.” Like the Dreyer of *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), like the Bresson of *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), Ozu gives us the sense that questions of talent and ambition have been settled or set aside, that he is now self-centered in what can only be called a selfless way. Presently, in *Tokyo Story*, he is placing on the screen the very least that will fulfill the truth of what he has seen, of what he knows, of life. There is no brave consciousness of integrity in this; as I stated toward the start of my essay, Ozu is simply consecrated to serving life, simply—and proudly.

All these matters are summed up in the film’s title, which may seem pedestrian but resonates powerfully. I want to emphasize that the title in English is an exact

translation from the Japanese (*Tokyo Monogatari*). And it seems to me finally indicative that Ozu called the film *Tokyo Story*, since it is neither in any intrinsic sense about Tokyo nor in any formal sense a story. Two people do go to a place called Tokyo, but it could have been any other place where space is being defined by more people than this couple are used to seeing together in one location. Moving through the space of this world, the old man and old woman help to define it for themselves. But even the space through which they moved on the way to their final destination was defined and redefined, by others as well as by themselves. When they finally arrive in Tokyo, these two are surprised that it is so near their home; when they are about to leave, it seems so far. Put another way, Tokyo is nowhere, and it is everywhere.

The story, insofar as there is one in this film, is in a sense only a series of confirmations, or one big extended confirmation: that everyone is smaller or different from what we thought or expected, including ourselves; but that, nonetheless, it is for the most part a privilege to share in this realization, a privilege to be one of the only group of sentient beings in the universe, beings who can imagine time and space and self. Moreover, the story in *Tokyo Story* is ultimately the same as all other stories because, ultimately, all things in it have passed; and it ends, spatially speaking, as all stories must end: in stillness.

As far as *Tokyo Story*'s reputation among all other "storied" films goes, the British journal *Sight and Sound* periodically conducts an international poll asking critics to list their ten favorite fiction features ever made; and on my list—along with several others—there is always *Tokyo Story*. I saw it for the first time in 1971 in a Japanese retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art. And only in 1972 did the film have its first theatrical release in the United States. I saw it again at that time; I have screened it several more times over the intervening years (including the 1982 showing at the Japan Society in New York); I re-viewed it twice recently on DVD; and I am happy, in retrospect, that it was, and is, on my list. My list aside, I am happy that this film exists, and that I was on *its* list. Even as Ozu's gravestone (which I once visited in Tokyo) is inscribed with only the character *mu*, so too does *Tokyo Story* finally seem to be inscribed with this one character. It means, or is usually translated as, "nothingness," but *mu* suggests the nothing that, in Zen Buddhist philosophy, is everything. Which is all—or null—that I have to say about Yasujiro Ozu and his Tokyo story.

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## Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour*

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Charles Thomas Samuels is representative of those who attack *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959) as an experiment in modernist structure at the expense of traditional substance:

Daring as an innovator, and . . . unsatisfactory as an artist, is Alain Resnais, whose major achievement is an editing style that represents the flux of memory—with its confusion of tenses and yearning for the subjunctive. Unfortunately, Resnais neither invents nor writes the scenarios on which this technique is lavished, and he has deplorable taste in collaborators. Marguerite Duras's script for *Hiroshima, mon amour* is portentous and melodramatic. (9)

But *Hiroshima, mon amour* is also often discussed as a successful experiment in modernist structure. Roy Armes is representative of those who take this approach to the film and praise it for its achievement:

It was not until nine years after *Orphée* and *Rashomon* that the European cinema took further decisive steps forward in its self-imposed task of freeing itself from the bonds of an aesthetic based on the nineteenth-century novel and the “well-made play”: Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* is a good example of the total novelty that now became possible. (27-28)

. . . [*Hiroshima, mon amour* partakes of] certain stylistic methods which may be taken as characteristic of modern film-making—a refusal of psychological explanation, a stylization of acting, and an interest in novel combinations of image and music. (83-84)

In the following, I want to consider *Hiroshima, mon amour* on the level at which it seems to me most interesting and most successful: the level of its modernist structure as wedded to substantial meaning, particularly symbolic meaning.

Resnais was approached after the appearance of *Night and Fog* (1955) to make a documentary about the atomic bomb. *Night and Fog* was a documentary about Auschwitz; *Hiroshima, mon amour* would turn out to be a fiction film, with the script by the novelist Duras. *Hiroshima, mon amour* does, of course, include footage of the city and its people after the dropping of the bomb, and half of the film is shot in modern-day Hiroshima. But the aesthetic impulse behind it was not to document or to re-create fictionally the horror of the atomic bomb; that impulse was foremost, I believe, to create through the character of the Frenchwoman a metaphor for the tragedy of the bomb.

Resnais decided to make a fiction film instead of a documentary or a

fictionalized documentary because he wanted, I think, to make his film more accessible to the Western audience for whom the dropping of the bomb meant the end of war with Japan. (The Frenchwoman in the film is herself an actress who has come to Hiroshima to make a fictionalized documentary about the bomb, in which she plays a nurse.) In fact, he began to make a documentary but did not complete it, stopping work after only a few months. To make a documentary about the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis at Auschwitz is one thing, Resnais must have thought. But to have made a documentary about the horrors perpetrated by the Allies, specifically the Americans, at Hiroshima would have been quite another, he seemed to sense, because unlike the Jews in the concentration camps, the Japanese were aggressors in World War II. The atomic bomb was designed to stop them once and for all.

A Resnais film documenting the devastation and suffering caused by the bomb would therefore have been incomplete and unacceptable to a Western audience. Even a film fictionalizing both the devastation and suffering caused by the bomb *and* the pressing reasons for its dropping would seem inevitably to be creating more sympathy for the victims than for the victors. However, a film that created the two sides to the dropping of the bomb—the tragedy of its dropping, that is—through metaphor would reach, and affect, its audience. In this regard, Camus was right to say that “it is better to suffer certain injustices than to commit them even to win wars” (114). On the other hand, the Americans could argue that they were equally right to inflict great suffering on the Japanese rather than continue to suffer themselves.



**31. *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), dir. Alain Resnais**

The Frenchwoman comes to Hiroshima thinking that she knows all there is to know (through newsreel footage, books, interviews, and the like) about the atomic bomb and the effect it had on the city. The Japanese architect with whom she has a

torrid affair asks her how she can know what she has not experienced, either directly or indirectly. (He is a native of Hiroshima but was not there when the bomb was dropped; the rest of his family *was* there, and all of them perished.) Naturally, there is something to what he says—we get footage of the leveled Hiroshima to *underline* his meaning, not to give us the experience of the havoc wrought by the bomb. But the real point here is that the Frenchwoman, in her private life during the war, underwent an experience similar to the experience of those who *dropped* the bomb, not those who received it. And she has undergone an experience since the war openly comparable to the experience of the conscience-stricken airmen who dropped the bomb, if not to the one undergone by the leaders and citizens of the triumphant nation that decided to use it.



**32. *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), dir. Alain Resnais**

The Frenchwoman (neither she nor the Japanese is ever named), living in occupied Nevers, fell in love and had a long affair with a German soldier. Shortly before the liberation of the town, the soldier, waiting to meet his lover at an appointed place in the countryside, was killed by Resistance fighters. The Frenchwoman, subsequently identified as the lover of a German, had her head shaved by the citizens of Nevers and was paraded through the town to verbal and physical abuse, as well as to the disgrace of her family. In order to avoid further censure by the townspeople, her family virtually kept her prisoner in the cellar of their home. Finally she was allowed to move to Paris and did not see Nevers or her family again. Although she eventually married, it is clear from her statements that the Japanese is the first man she has been able to love since the German. (She says

to the Japanese at one point, “Oh! How good it is to be with someone, sometime”; and she tells him about her affair with the German, although she has never told her husband.)

The Frenchwoman’s love affair with the German was tragic, if one defines tragedy as the conflict of two goods. She irresistibly fell in love with him, yet she should not have carried on a love affair with an enemy of France. To love is good; to support one’s country is equally good. Likewise, the Frenchwoman’s fellow citizens understandably punished her for fraternizing with the enemy. But they should not have punished her, since she did not collaborate with the Germans against the French—indeed, her boyfriend may have treated the people of Nevers better on account of his relationship with one of their daughters—and since she was so young and inexperienced.

The tragedy of the Frenchwoman’s love is analogous to the tragedy of the atomic bomb. The Americans had to drop the bomb, because the Japanese refused to surrender and a land invasion of Japan would have meant the loss of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of American as well as Japanese lives. Yet, they should not have dropped it, because of the unprecedented destruction and long-term suffering it would cause; because their use of the bomb would stigmatize the Americans forever in the eyes of the world; and because they would be introducing a weapon that would be copied by other nations and undergo further development, to become the hydrogen bomb. To defend one’s country is good; to “love thy neighbor” (as in “thou shalt not kill”) is also good—or at least to do so to the extent that one does not subject him to atomic weaponry is good!

The very title of the film expresses the tragedy of the bomb, as well as the tragedy of the Frenchwoman’s love. The juxtaposition of “mon amour” against “Hiroshima” is startling. The love the Americans should have had for the Japanese is thus juxtaposed against the horror (immediately called forth by the word “Hiroshima”) they should have inflicted, and did inflict, upon them. The love the Frenchwoman had for the German is similarly juxtaposed against the death he should have suffered, and did suffer, at the hands of Resistance fighters. “Hiroshima” in the film becomes a metonym, not only for the Japanese architect but also for the German soldier, since the Frenchwoman talks to the Japanese as if he were the German a number of times. When she does so, he does not act surprised. Through this device, as well as through the device of having the Frenchwoman and the Japanese speak throughout in incantatory tones, Resnais encourages us to view his film on the symbolic rather than the realistic level. To this end, also, he does not name the characters, does not permit them to engage in small talk, and has the Frenchwoman utter the following line to the Japanese, in which she describes the meaning of the film’s title from her point of view: “You destroy me, you are good for me.”

Although it may at first seem strange that Resnais has chosen the tragedy of the Frenchwoman's *love* to be a metaphor for the tragedy of the *bomb*, his choice is actually entirely appropriate. For loving the enemy is the only thing that *approaches*, in its seeming incomprehensibility, grotesqueness, or even monstrosity, utterly annihilating (as opposed to simply defeating) the enemy by means of the atomic bomb. Although it may seem equally strange that Resnais has included someone French in a metaphor for the tragedy of the bomb, this too is entirely appropriate. America is never referred to by name in *Hiroshima, mon amour*. For purposes of distancing, it is left to a foreigner, from a country that was almost a non-combatant in the war, to incarnate America's presence—one implied by the very word "Hiroshima."

The French are thus the apparent opposites of the Americans who dropped the bomb, just as the Frenchwoman's love is the apparent opposite of the bomb's destruction. But the rapid French capitulation to (and collaboration with) the enemy is itself the only thing that *approaches*, in its seeming incomprehensibility, grotesqueness, or even monstrosity, the American annihilation of the enemy by means of the bomb. Like the woman's love for the German, the French capitulation was tragic—one knows that they could not have won if they had fought an all-out war against the Germans; yet one senses that they should have fought anyway, lost, and maintained their honor. And even as the French have suffered since the war from the tragedy of their capitulation-cum-collaboration, so too has the Frenchwoman been suffering from the tragedy of her love affair with the German soldier. Not only has she not been able to love another man until she meets the Japanese; she has also not been able to love herself—love for another, of course, presupposes love for oneself—out of guilt for having had an affair with one of the enemy.

John Ward, for his part, believes that the Frenchwoman has been "psychologically deformed" by her experience at Nevers and that her psychosis flaws *Hiroshima, mon amour*:

The experiences of the girl were not of a kind that would give rise to normal personal memories, or even to the kind of memories which, just because of their extremeness, could serve as a paradigm of a class of 'standard' personal memories. Hers were in fact traumatic. It is not just her relationship with her Japanese lover that is affected: her whole life has been crippled. . . . The simple fact is that, in various ways, she is not free to choose what she wants to do; and to that extent the film, as an analysis of how even lovers are kept apart by their pasts, is weakened. It is weakened because instead of developing the conflict between them, it assumes this conflict by making her the kind of woman any man would fail to get on with. (34-35)

To the extent that *Hiroshima, mon amour* is a realistic film, Ward is correct. The Japanese is “normal” and the Frenchwoman is “psychotic.” *That* is what keeps them apart. But if we look at the film symbolically, as being less about the lovers themselves than about the two sides in World War II they represent, then I think that the flaw Ward speaks of disappears.

This particular Japanese (as played by Eiji Okada) is the perfect one to place in service as a symbol for his people, since he did not suffer any physical harm himself from the bomb and since his looks are more Western than those of the average Japanese. Thus we are distanced sufficiently through him from the actual suffering caused by the bomb, just as we are distanced through the Frenchwoman (Emmanuèle Riva) from those who actually dropped it. This frees us to contemplate and lament the very tragedy of the atomic bomb’s creation and use. The Japanese and his Frenchwoman are in this way stand-ins for the genuine articles, symbols by detraction. Unlike traditional filmic or literary symbols, which are intended to enrich our perceptions of what in real life we take for granted, these two are meant to make us contemplate in art what we otherwise could or would not. All film characters are literally “figures of light”; the Japanese and the Frenchwoman are figuratively so in the sense that, as symbols, they are shadows of the substance on which Resnais means to shine his light.

The Japanese is more precisely a symbol for his defeated people, who, in rebuilding their country, were at the same time “externalizing” their wartime experience—working off their suffering, if you will. He has adjusted to his (or his family’s) experience of Hiroshima and has been involved, as an architect, in rebuilding the city. His fellow Hiroshimans now live so well with their past that they erect museums to memorialize it and give guided tours to commemorate it. The Frenchwoman, by contrast, has not adjusted to her experience at Nevers, has never returned to the city, and has been involved as an actress in living her life through others, on stage or on the set, and thereby negating her past.

In her joy-guilt over loving the German soldier, the Frenchwoman is a symbol for the victorious Americans, who, overjoyed at saving their own country and the countries of the Allies, were at the same time internalizing their guilt for destroying Hiroshima with the atomic bomb. (This guilt was externalized in the well-documented soul-searching, if not suffering, after the war of the crew members of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that carried the bomb.) The Americans—in Indochina in particular, where they followed the French—were later to attempt to negate *their* past by playing the role of peacemaker or savior in foreign conflicts, all the while continuing to build up arms and set themselves up for the same dilemma they faced in World War II, this time with the added danger that they themselves might be destroyed by nuclear weapons launched by the Soviets or one of their satellite states.

The Frenchwoman faces her World War II dilemma again in Hiroshima—to remain or not to remain with her Japanese lover, a one-time enemy like the German. Far from being merely a relationship between a psychotic woman and a normal man doomed to failure from the start, the relationship between the Frenchwoman and the Japanese is symbolic of the difficult rapprochement between a repressed America and a reconstructed Japan. (Remember that *Hiroshima, mon amour* was made only thirteen to fourteen years after the war.) The Japanese wants to find out all he can about Nevers, so that he can know the Frenchwoman better. The Frenchwoman, thinking she knows all there is to know about Hiroshima before she gets there, learns that she must come to terms herself with what happened at Nevers. Like the American “peacekeepers” abroad, the actress in the film “about peace” (she says) must return home to find herself.

Even as she could not tear herself away from the dead German’s body in Nevers, the Frenchwoman cannot leave the Japanese. But she must, and she will. Even as the German courted death by continuing to see the Frenchwoman as the Americans approached and the Resistance fighters thereby became braver, the Japanese risks psychological damage by continuing to woo the Frenchwoman in the face of her moral-mental dilemma. He must, and he will, give her up in order for himself to survive. The Japanese must return to re-building Hiroshima—significantly, he has stopped work completely while conducting his affair with the Frenchwoman. On the realistic level, their love could not have existed without the bomb—recall that the Frenchwoman comes to Hiroshima in the first place to make a film about the bomb, or about the banning of atomic weaponry. On the symbolic level, their love cannot continue to exist *because* of the bomb: the Frenchwoman, in returning to Nevers, symbolizes America “coming home” to confront its own romance with nuclear warfare.



### 33. *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), dir. Alain Resnais

The Frenchwoman’s love for the German isolated her in Nevers, has isolated her since the war, and will continue to isolate her: she must return to Nevers alone,



a heroine who has, through contact in the present with the searching Japanese, experienced tragic recognition about her past. (He may be seen, in this sense, as a purely dramatic device, in addition to being the German's "double" and a symbol in his own right for Japan.) Just so, America's atomic bombing of Japan alienated her from some of her own people, separated her, in power and might, from the rest of the world, and has continued to separate her. Although other countries have had, and continue to have, the bomb, only America has ever used it. Now the United States has a stockpile of nuclear weapons that is matched only by that of Russia, with whom she remains isolated in perpetual conflict despite the so-called end of the Cold War. Like the Frenchwoman, America has had to return home alone, a heroine who, through "involvements" abroad as well as postwar occupation of Japan, has again and again had to comprehend the tragedy of the bomb, of the conflicting, reconstructive as well as destructive demands of absolute power.

As I left the movie theater years ago after seeing *Hiroshima, mon amour*, I said to myself, "I'd love to read what the critics have to say about this one." I did read them, and I have read much about the film since, but without satisfaction, because the critics have always spent less time sorting out its meanings than describing (or deprecating) its structure. In this case, the two—structure and meaning—go together. The result is a happy marriage, if not for the Japanese man and the Frenchwoman, then for *Hiroshima, mon amour*.

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## Ingmar Bergman's *Winter Light*

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Ingmar Bergman began his film career, alas, not with *Winter Light* (1962) but with a paranoid invention salvaged by Alf Sjöberg, who, from the sketch submitted by Bergman, put the Swedish cinema on the map in 1944 with the film known in the United States as *Torment*. The germ of this movie was Bergman's fear that he would be flunked on his university entrance examination; his revenge in advance was his creation of a tyrannical schoolmaster whom he aptly named Caligula. (Sjöberg added a political implication by having the actor made up to resemble Himmler, Reichsführer of the Schutzstaffel [SS].) Over the years, Bergman's compulsion to nourish every slight, every adverse criticism, grew into his now familiar, never subdued war against Father, who once punished him by locking him into a closet. We are at liberty to wonder if this ever happened and simply to credit Bergman with singular tenacity for inventing an image that gratified him. And for extrapolating from it one of his twin obsessions (the other being the fatality of the couple): the despotism of the Father and hence the fallibility of God. (If there has always been something shopworn about Bergman's conception, it is because Dostoevsky got there first, with the most.)

Among the many other obsessions of Ingmar Bergman that American critics failed to note, or failed to question closely, was his pervasive resentment in his art of the achieved man and occasionally the career woman—doctor, lawyer, professor, business executive. From the evidence of his numerous films, Bergman hated every professional except the artist. Predictably, since he was a puritan, his defense of the artist as somehow sacrosanct engendered a feedback of guilt: periodically, having enshrined the creative personality in one context or another, he seemed driven to follow up with a thumping self-accusation of the artist as charlatan or as detached and inhuman being, as in 1968's *Shame* and *Hour of the Wolf*. You may be sure that Bergman in his heart did not believe this, but he needed to hear an answering echo from time to time that absolved him of his own accusation.

Thus *Autumn Sonata* (1978) is characterized by the same kind of ambivalence that undermined the artistic veracity of *Wild Strawberries* in 1957. In the earlier film, Bergman's portrait of an old professor, whose egoistic frigidity lost him an idyllic sweetheart and produced an impotent son, was at odds with the visibly sympathetic performance of Victor Sjöström. Just as Bergman was reluctant in *Wild Strawberries* to follow the implications of his own scenario by destroying the professor-figure entirely, so in *Autumn Sonata* he sets up Ingrid Bergman (in her final theatrical film) as a concert pianist-cum-mother who is supposed to have crippled her two daughters (one child being insufficient for the force of his accusation); then the *auteur* becomes so enamored of the personality he has given his character that he is hard put to convince us she could possibly be either as indifferent or as ruthless as her articulate daughter maintains.

There is small point in trying to weigh truth in any antithesis that Bergman contrived for *Autumn Sonata*. At any latter-day movie of his, including the slightly earlier *Serpent's Egg* (1977), the subsequent, appositely titled *From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980), and up to and including his final film, *Saraband* (2003), one cannot be sure whether this director-screenwriter is unaware of the dramatic incongruities that he creates through poor motivation or whether he does not really care. He seems indifferent to plot because a plot is action consistent with the revealed nature of its characters, and Bergman seems unable to perceive consistency; his characters say what he wants them to say, to an end he alone has chosen, as opposed to what they would say if allowed to speak for themselves.

Critics in America consistently underrate the Swedish inability of Bergman to commit himself to the terms of a moral choice he has ostensibly initiated—unless, that is, he knows for certain he has a target to which absolutely no one will object. The sympathetic link between this Swede and the Americans is the fundamental puritanism we culturally share; Bergman's Nordic damnations, like Strindberg's, are taken far less seriously, for example, by the Italians, the French, or even the English. Indeed, Strindberg is perhaps the only authentic father-figure to whose authority, aesthetic or otherwise, Bergman has consented: the “rehearsal” in *After the Rehearsal* (1984), for example, is one of Strindberg's plays (*A Dream Play*, 1902), a number of which Bergman himself directed for the theater. And *Autumn Sonata* may derive its inspiration from that mad master's chamber drama-cum-dream play titled *The Ghost Sonata* (1907), not least because Bergman says in *Images: My Life in Film* that he initially conceived his film like a dream in three acts, with “no cumbersome sets, two faces, and three kinds of lighting: one evening light, one night light, and one morning light” (335).

Moreover, Strindberg composed *The Ghost Sonata* not long after the five psychotic episodes of his “inferno crisis,” even as Bergman wrote *Autumn Sonata* immediately upon recovering from a nervous breakdown that resulted from his arrest in Sweden on charges of tax evasion. A major difference between these two artists, however, is that Strindberg's psychiatric crisis restored his religious faith, and that faith gave much of his post-inferno work a mystical cast in which benevolent or judicious transcendental powers were operative—expressing themselves even during the most everyday of occurrences. Bergman's breakdown, by contrast, had no such effect either on the director or his films, which from *The Seventh Seal* (1957) to *The Virgin Spring* (1960) to *The Silence* (1963) had led progressively not only to the rejection of all religious belief, but also to the conviction that human life is haunted by a virulent, active evil.

Bergman was once, it must be recalled, a master of comedy, as in his gloss on Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939), *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), for in secular, and even more so divine, comedy you can give full rein to the improbable. You can also do so in a religious allegory like Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, if not in existential

meditations of the kind exemplified by his “faith” trilogy of *Through a Glass Darkly* (1961), *Winter Light*, and *The Silence*, which, along with the earlier *Naked Night* (1953) and *The Magician* (1958) and the subsequent *Persona* (1966), justly secured the reputation of Ingmar Bergman in America. Even he seems to agree, however, that the enigmas of *Autumn Sonata* represent a parody of his earlier, better work, as he put the matter in *Images*: “Has Bergman begun to make Bergman films? I find that, yes, *Autumn Sonata* is an annoying example . . . of creative exhaustion” (*Images*, 334-335). By 1992’s *The Best Intentions* and *Sunday’s Children*, both of which he wrote if not directed—actually even before them in *Fanny and Alexander* (1982)—his exhaustion had turned into self-absorption, as he became a purveyor of the probable or consistent only through the form of autobiography.

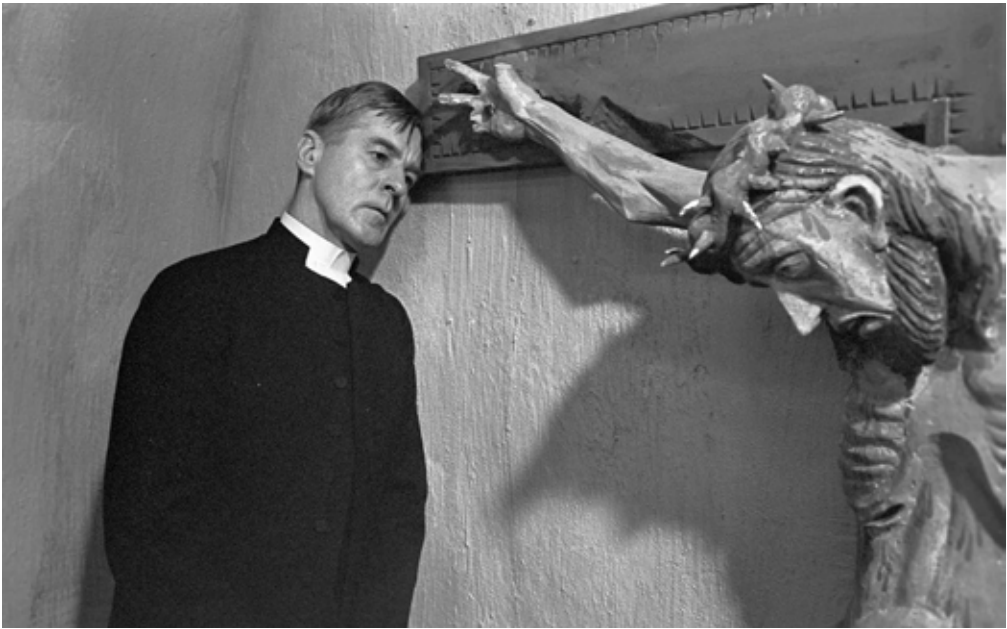
Perhaps that was because he, and we, had come to live in a secular, narcissistic, even hedonistic age, unlike the age—half a century past—during which *Winter Light* was made. This is not to say that something like *Winter Light* couldn’t be made now. We are dealing here with the rule and not the exception, the middle, not the extremities. Obviously, none of this is intended to denigrate Bergman’s film as a mediocrity, or *a priori* to privilege contemporary films over it. Still, “men are as the time is,” as Edmund declares in *King Lear*, and no artist in any medium—particularly one so popular, or immediate, as the cinema—can claim exemption.

*Winter Light* takes place on what used to be a day of rest and devotion—the Sabbath, in this case one wintry Sunday in a rural clergyman’s life, between matins and vespers. The middle entry in Bergman’s “faith” trilogy, *Winter Light* suffers far less from the defect of the other two parts, *Through a Glass Darkly* and *The Silence*: such an excess of symbolism that each picture breaks down into a series of discernible metaphors for spiritual alienation rather than an aggregation of those metaphors into an organic, affecting work. Though, apart from its literary-like piling up of symbols, *Through a Glass Darkly* relied on almost none of the arty legerdemain that marred *The Magician* and *The Seventh Seal*, *Winter Light* is even starker and more circumscribed. So much so that this film, somewhat more than the one that immediately followed it, makes one feel that the (ir)religious vision Bergman had been formulating in all his major pictures up to now has finally shed its excrescences and become as simple and direct, as pure and honest, as it is possible to be.

*Winter Light* is only eighty minutes in length compared to the ninety-one of *Through a Glass Darkly* and the ninety-six minutes of *The Silence*; and it uses relatively few actors and settings, like those “chamber” works. But they at least have musical scores (in both cases by Bach), whereas the only music in *Winter Light* occurs during church services in accompaniment to Swedish psalms. Such economy of means, of course, is a matter of great artistry, of artistic *refinement*. And no filmmaker, not even Michelangelo Antonioni, was ever Bergman’s superior when it came to knowing what to leave out (one can almost divide true cinematic

artists from mere moviemakers on the question of such exclusion)—the absences in *Winter Light* being as significant as what is presented. They in fact contribute in the most central way to the picture's theme, as well as to its visual architecture, since Bergman is dealing here with an image of spiritual darkness and desolation, with an “absence” in the soul.

That absence is a crisis in, almost a loss of, faith, and it is a middle-aged Lutheran minister who is in its grip. To describe his condition in this way is entirely accurate, for his anguish is experienced like a violent seizure, the “silence of God” being a palpable thing. Since the season is winter, the days are short and the light is sparse and sterile—a counterpart to the weather, the climate as well as the illumination, in the pastor's soul. The planes and angles of the camera's investigations (black-and-white cinematography by Sven Nykvist) mark out this universe of gray emptiness within a framework that makes it even more austere or stringent. And the “gray area” here, the study in varying shades of gray, is entirely appropriate, because the clergyman's crisis is a continuing one; nothing is resolved either for or against religious belief. In a different film, a different life, we would abide in the expectation of answers; in *Winter Light*, we can only take heart from a continuity of questions.



### 34. *Winter Light* (1962), dir. Ingmar Bergman

The minister is accompanied, in his clerical vocation, by a schoolteacher who loves him and wants to marry and whose presence he accepts—but whom he cannot love in return. For it develops that when his wife died some years before, his capacity to love died with her, and it becomes clear that for him such a loss is itself a demonstration of God's absence or indifference. Thus does Bergman, in



the most delicate, unrhetorical, yet profoundly moving way, link the realms of natural and supernatural, diurnal and supernal love, keeping the tension between them at a high pitch and never resorting to cheap or arbitrary solutions. For him life's special agony is just such a rending of the loving bond between God and man. Unlike Antonioni, whose work also concentrated on this subject, he does not believe that man invented God but now must be manly enough to admit it and destroy him. Bergman is concerned to find a way of living with—at the very least—the memory of God, and the only way to such divinity is through affinity: if not the loving marriage between two human beings, then fellow-feeling of the kind that is contained in the very idea of “ministration.”

Or so this Lutheran minister learns. One of his parishioners, a fisherman with three children and a pregnant wife, is in a state of depression, deepened by the immanence in the world of nuclear-bomb threats. Brought by his wife, the fisherman talks to the pastor after morning service—and the pastor's own spiritual bankruptcy is glaringly revealed in their talk. Later comes word that the fisherman has committed suicide, which brings the minister face to face with the truth that his own worst suffering—as well as that of his flock—is now caused by his inability to fulfill his vocation.



### 35. *Winter Light* (1962), dir. Ingmar Bergman

But through the instrumentality of another character, a hunchbacked sexton with a wry, mordant yet exceptionally deep commitment to faith, he is shown the glint of possibility, of light whose very promise or idea is contained in this picture's title. That glinting possibility consists in going on, in living through the aridity and absence, in making continual acts of faith precisely where faith is most difficult



or even repellent. The film ends at twilight with the pastor beginning the vespers service (even as *Winter Light* began with a communion service), in a church with only one or two parishioners in attendance. On the one hand, this clergyman is slipping back almost desperately into clerical routine; on the other, he continues to minister to the faithful, and the darkness of winter night has not yet come.

This summary fails to do justice to the mastery Bergman revealed over his materials in *Winter Light*. For one thing, his actors—Max von Sydow as the fisherman, Ingrid Thulin as the teacher, Gunnar Björnstrand as the pastor—could not be bettered. They had by this time become the perfect instruments of Bergman's directorial will, forming what was undoubtedly the finest cinematic acting company in the world, one that the stage (where Bergman began and, to some extent, remained) might still envy, or envy even more, today. Here, as elsewhere in the "faith" trilogy, their work was especially difficult, for they had to give human gravity to a stripped-down exercise in God-famished theology.

That is, the film's effect depends on the penetration *in us* of the minister's doubt, as well as the teacher's hopeless love and the fisherman's boundless despair (which are meant to reflect, in their way, on the central problem of religious belief). The spiritual problem is not merely stated in *Winter Light*, as some commentators continue to assert; it *is* visualized or externalized, as I described earlier. Still, to deal in physical film terms with the complex metaphysical question of the existence of God and the equally difficult-to-sustain phenomenon of human isolation or alienation requires performances of a freshening, even frightening kind. And Bergman got them in *Winter Light*, to create a solemn, spare, severe artwork that is nonetheless full of strange, harsh beauty.

Another requirement of an authentic spiritual style is that it be grounded in naturalistic simplicity, even abstraction—as *Winter Light* is—not in widescreen pyrotechnics of the kind found in such sand-and-sandals epics as *Quo Vadis?* (1951), *Ben Hur* (1959), *King of Kings* (1961), and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). The spirit resides within, in internal conviction, not in external trickery. Everything that is exterior, ornamental, liturgical, hagiographic, and miraculous in the universal doctrine and everyday practice of Catholicism (as opposed to Bergman's unaccommodated Lutheranism) does indeed show affinities with the cinema—conceived, with its spectacular iconography, as a kind of miracle in itself akin to the miracle of the Sacrament or the saints. But these affinities, which have made for the commercial success of countless movies, are also the source of the religious insignificance of most of them.

Almost everything that is good in the domain of religious film, then, was created not by the exploitation of the patent consanguinity of Catholicism with the cinema, but rather by working against it: by the psychological and moral deepening of the spiritual factor as well as by the renunciation of the physical

representation either of the supernatural or of God's grace. In other words, although the austerity of the Protestant sensibility is not indispensable to the making of a good Catholic motion picture, it can nevertheless be a real advantage, as evidenced by films such as Robert Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951) and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) as well as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Gospel According to St. Matthew* (1964). As for the thing-in-itself, good Protestant cinema, you have Bergman's "faith" trilogy and the picture of his that directly preceded it, *The Virgin Spring*, in addition to such films of his fellow Scandinavian Carl Dreyer as *Day of Wrath* (1943) and *The Word* (1955).

My reservations about the secularity and hedonism of our age, as opposed to the one that produced these "faith" films, are those of an aging critic who sees an increasing number of "faithless" movies coming along, yet who continues to hope (if not believe) that there is more to love than lust, that the spirit is greater in importance than the body, and that romance has as much to do with religious rapture as with sexual transport. For all their white heat, in other words, the giddy fantasy of most romantic movies (let alone porno pictures) leaves me alone in earthbound darkness, coolly and contractively contemplating the state of my own connubial bond. Whereas the sober mystery of *Winter Light* may have left me ice-cold, but it is glistening cold that seeks out the expansive warmth of divine solace (a solace that disappeared from so much of Bergman's work subsequent to this film). And everything that so rises, naturally, must converge.

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## Ermanno Olmi's *The Fiancés*

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Ermanno Olmi, born in Bergamo in 1931, is the Italian filmmaker most committed to and identified with a regional heritage. His films are distinctly Lombardian; for the most part they describe life in Milan, the provincial capital (e.g., *Il posto* [*The Job*, 1961], *One Fine Day* [1969], *In the Summertime* [1971], *The Circumstance* [1974]). He has also filmed in the Lombardian Alps (*Time Stood Still* [1959]) and in his native Bergamo (*The Tree of Wooden Clogs* [1978]), but even when he ventures to Sicily, it is to make a film about a Milanese worker temporarily assigned to the south who longs for home (*The Fiancés* [1963]). And when Olmi makes a semi-documentary biography of a Pope (*A Man Called John* [1965]), it is of the Lombardian pope, John XXIII.

Furthermore, his work bears affinities to the central literary figure of the Lombardian tradition, Alessandro Manzoni, whose great historical novel, *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*), is variously reflected in at least three of Olmi's films: most directly in *The Fiancés*, whose very title recasts the 1827 novel, but also in the idealization of a great ecclesiastic (*A Man Called John*) and in the vivid recreation of a past century (*The Tree of Wooden Clogs*), which portrays peasant life in the nineteenth century rather than Manzoni's seventeenth). Perhaps the most significant Manzonian characteristic of Olmi's cinema, however, is its Catholicism. Of all the major Italian filmmakers, he has the least problematic relationship to the Church—a relationship amply on display in his recent film *The Cardboard Village* (2011), in which an elderly priest—who, like the camera itself, never moves outside his beautiful yet condemned parish church—attempts to shield illegal African immigrants from the authorities.

For the most part, Olmi's career has centered upon the individual worker, legal or illegal, caught between the search for employment and the quest to assert his dignity through labor; quite often this tension carries over from work to the conjugal or pre-conjugal love life of the protagonist. One of the most unusual aspects of the Italian cinema of the late '50s and the '60s is the way in which it affords us multiple perspectives on this individual worker—indeed, on the economic boom of which he was a part following the postwar recovery. Whereas the directors of the French New Wave each created a unique poetic universe, Italian cinema of the same period feels like a series of moons circling around one planet. Again and again, one encounters the identical sociological material, whether filtered through Michelangelo Antonioni's exacting nihilism, Luchino Visconti's luxurious emotionalism, Dino Risi's comic exuberance, or Valerio Zurlini's stirring sobriety. Over and over, one sees the same construction sites, quick-stop cafés, barren roadsides, and cramped apartments (owned by noisy, nosy landladies) that were constants of postwar Italian society. Most strikingly of all, these films feature a parade of young men outfitted in regulation white-collar attire yet betraying

their essential inexperience—of the world itself as well as the work-world. That is, they are ill-equipped for a life of work and responsibility in a mechanized, high-efficiency world, and consequently they are lonesome for the nurturing comforts of home.

Of all the talented filmmakers who visited this particular terrain, none responded more soulfully than Ermanno Olmi. His seldom-cited début feature, *Time Stood Still*, for example, is itself a wonderful film that, with warmth and humor, meticulously chronicles the daily routine of two men who, isolated high in the mountains during the long winter months, guard an unfinished hydro-electric dam until the workers can return to complete it in the spring. Olmi manages in the course of this semi-documentary to perform the neat trick of portraying tedium without being tedious. But it was the one-two punch of his second and third pictures, not the impact of his first, that put Olmi on the international movie map. *Il posto* and *The Fiancés* are often bracketed together, and, although they are substantially different, it does make a kind of sense to regard them as bookend works. Think of them, if you will, as two estuaries growing out of the same large river: *Il posto* flows north to Milan, while *The Fiancés* flows south and across the channel to Sicily.

These two films, like most of Olmi's *oeuvre*, are job-oriented in one way or another (his *The Legend of the Holy Drinker* [1988] being a touching exception to this rule). All of his movies are also documentary-based, in the sense that their narratives are structured around unspectacular dilemmas reflecting ordinary lives. And they are all shot in actual locations, with almost all of them featuring non-actors (two notable exceptions: Rod Steiger as Pope John XXIII in Olmi's only real failure, *A Man Called John*; and an unexpectedly moving Rutger Hauer in *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, which is also one of this director's rare literary adaptations [from the 1939 novella by Joseph Roth]).

Like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Francesco Rosi, and Bernardo Bertolucci, Olmi is a filmmaker nurtured by Italian neorealism in that, not only has he worked extensively with amateur actors in simplified naturalistic settings, he has also eschewed artificial lighting and employed an ascetic camera style. Instead of a mobile camera, Olmi makes extensive use of the zoom lens and relies heavily upon montage and even more on overlapping sounds to transform his realistically photographed scenes into psychologically inflected domains of space and time. Like the neorealist protagonists of Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, Olmi's heroes themselves are always poised between human solitude and membership in some kind of community, be it that of family, village, or office. Similarly, from *Time Stood Still* onwards, he has consistently focused on elemental work situations positioned between the charm of apprenticeship and the regret-cum-relief of retirement, in which everyday concerns are held up against a long view of the not-too-distant future.

But Olmi's second feature, *Il posto*, ushered something new into world cinema: a sense of intimacy between director and characters that surpassed anything in the canon of Italian neorealism. In the intervening years, this film has had a profound effect on directors as diverse as Wu Nien-jen, Abbas Kiarostami, and Martin Scorsese (whose *Raging Bull* [1980] contains more than one visual quotation from *Il posto*). And if it has not achieved the same legendary status as three movies released only one year earlier, in 1960—Antonioni's *L'avventura*, Visconti's *Rocco and His Brothers*, and Fellini's *La dolce vita*—this is probably on account of *Il posto*'s intimacy, its refusal to distance itself from its characters or subject in an age where detachment, irony, and objectivity are valued above all else. To wit, Olmi has almost always filmed people on the lower end of the economic ladder, leading unexceptional lives, yet he treats the details of these lives with the care or close attention—but without the embellishment—that a Quattrocento master would have lavished on an episode in the life of Christ. The result is that his great films (*Il posto*, *The Fiancés*, *The Tree of Wooden Clogs*, *The Legend of the Holy Drinker*, the first half of *Genesis* [1994]) lack the aesthetic, even romanticized, luster that attaches to the aforementioned classics.

Moreover, these pictures by Olmi also lack the kind of charismatic sweep we have come to associate with grand artistic visions whereby, in the work of an Antonioni, a Visconti, or a Fellini, the artist's sensibility acts as a kind of majestic, all-encompassing umbrella over the characters and the action. Olmi, like the Frenchman Robert Bresson, paints on a smaller canvas, where his passionate humanism can completely infuse his cinematic art. His films thus feel like one-to-one exchanges between real people; indeed, you have the impression that the director is walking hand-in-hand with each of his characters. "The sensation is that these choices of mine are not only mine but that others have [made] them too," Olmi said in an interview in 2008 (Cardullo, 26). "I really don't feel exclusive. My ambition instead, perhaps because of my peasant-worker background, is to look at the world *with* others, not as an aristocratic intellectual."

*Il posto*, for its part, looks at the world through the eyes of a young man who is entering the deadening, overly regimented, oppressive world of the white-collar work force, with only the romantic prospect of a charming fellow worker named Antonietta offering a measure of hope. *The Fiancés*, made two years later, is about a skilled blue-collar worker during his long and lonesome displacement (at the behest of his company) down south. Giovanni is at least ten years older than *Il posto*'s Domenico, and he is leaving his relationship with Liliana, his fiancée of some years, in a state of flux and uncertainty. Giovanni is therefore constantly drawn back to memories of his relationship with his girl, the sweet ones and the sad ones as well, while the young Domenico himself is continually pondering the future.

Both films are shot—by Lamberto Caimi—in a beautiful, almost lustrous black and white, but where *Il posto* is more of an interior, nighttime film (with its daylight effectively nullified by the windowless offices at company headquarters), *The Fiancés* is largely an open-air, daytime experience, in which Giovanni spends long stretches meandering through the Sicilian landscape. Which brings up a fascinating contrast: Domenico is constantly looking around, quietly absorbing every detail of the room or office in which he finds himself, while Giovanni is continually caught up in a reverie, his attention swept away from his exterior surroundings as the screen of reality dissolves into the image of doubt concerning his romance with Liliana. This is why, with one moving exception, *Il posto* proceeds in a straight line, whereas *The Fiancés* keeps slipping into the past tense.

Perhaps the principal reason these two films are always thought of together is much simpler: they both feature extended dancehall scenes, which have different outcomes yet are remarkably similar in tone and build-up. The company New Year's Eve dance in *Il posto* is that picture's anti-climactic climax, while *The Fiancés* opens at the dancehall where Giovanni and Liliana have a melancholy, even strained, date just before he is supposed to leave for Sicily, and where we later learn they first met several years before. In both movies, the dancehall is empty at the start, and that emptiness is at once comical and sad. Every seemingly disconnected detail there—such as the Buster Keaton-style hat that the grim-faced Domenico wears at the New Year's office party, like the throwing of sand on the floor at the beginning of *The Fiancés* as the couples sit in chairs waiting for the music to begin, or like the gigantic pill Liliana swallows before refusing to dance—carries a surreal (which is to say a reality beyond mere “realism”) overtone, not to mention a deep poignancy.

Let me deal now, in particular, with *The Fiancés*. Olmi's third feature film shows an enrichment of style and furthers his theme. His story is a familiar one in Italian life during this period: an engaged Milanese couple, in their late twenties or early thirties, is unable to marry for lack of money. The man, Giovanni, is a skilled welder, and his company assigns him to a new plant in Sicily. He must accept the job because it is a rare opportunity, even though, for these two lovers, it means being apart from each other for almost two years. The young woman, Liliana, is desolate because she fears his departure means the end between them. He assures her that this will not be the case, that in fact the separation will be good for their relationship. Most of *The Fiancés*, which could hardly be simpler, is then taken up with the facts and feelings of their long separation. (It is never clear in the film, though, just how long Giovanni has been in Sicily, how many of the nearly twenty-four months have actually passed—which is part of the point, or one of the ways in which Olmi underlines the “eternity” of Giovanni and Liliana's wait to be reunited.)





### 36. *The Fiancés* (1963), dir. Ermanno Olmi

We go with Giovanni to Sicily—which, to a northerner, is almost like a foreign country. The place is a company town, and, though nothing is bad there, everything is cheerless: the antiseptic company hotel where he first stays, the bus everyday to the plant, the *pensione* where he later rents a ply-board cubicle. In his busy but lonely routine this man fights quietly and without conscious heroism to maintain his person: as he does his work, plays boyish pranks with other grown men in the hotel, strolls on Sundays through the hot, flat countryside, sits on a curb and stares, wanders (like the lone dog we see) into a church. Through all of this, Giovanni's sustenance is Liliana, in her letters as well as in his thoughts. One Sunday afternoon, he goes to the expense of telephoning the girl, but her response is one of alarm: "What's wrong?" she wants to know. Then Giovanni goes for a walk and is caught in a summer storm. He shelters himself in a doorway, alone but, we feel, alive—to the world, to himself, to his love. And the film comes to a sudden end: sudden but complete, mysterious yet powerful.

Since so much of *The Fiancés* is thus devoted to solitary longing in, and acclimation to, a new and unfriendly place, it is natural that Giovanni's attention should be riveted by images of wonder: the unexpected lyricism of showers of sparks cascading from steel at his worksite; the unearthly beauty of mounds of salt raked up by workers on some flats; the storybook windmills in the fields set against the drabest of domestic dwellings on the streets. These moments, which would doubtless prompt the same kind of rapt attention they get from Giovanni and Olmi's camera, were we to encounter them in real life, prepare us for the final images of this strangely haunting and ineffably gentle film, where both affirmation and uncertainty seem to come pouring down from the sky in equal measures.



**37. *The Fiancés* (1963), dir. Ermanno Olmi**

Giovanni's reserve (the product, at once, of affirmation and uncertainty) and his rough-hewn elegance; Liliana's loving yet wounded dignity and her plain, dark appeal: these are the film's visual and emotional constants, and they function like two different instruments sharing one theme in a piece of modal jazz. *The Fiancés* is made in what I shall call Olmi's time-slipping register, and it is by far his most beautiful foray into modernist territory, simply because it feels so homegrown. While a number directors at the time (Alain Resnais prominent among them) were trying their hands at fractured temporal structures in the same way that one might try on a new and fashionable coat, Olmi employs such a structure to convey, not the relativity of time or the subjectivity of all human perception, but something very simple, and very precise (as well as very old)—longing. The result is that the past and the present, desire and work, offset each other in *The Fiancés* not only with great precision and simplicity, but also with great beauty and eloquence. We are thus able to take in the mundane details of Giovanni's exile from his northern homeland—the Sicilian heat, the arduous work, an uninviting TV room at the company hotel, the flimsily constructed bedrooms with tiny bathrooms—in their full, sterling measure because Giovanni is reacting to them with the same, entirely realistic mixture of curiosity and abstraction, his attention continually drawn away to Liliana even as ours is drawn to the abstract notion that what we are watching is not life itself, but a film.



**38. *The Fiancés* (1963), dir. Ermanno Olmi**

By the same token, the force of Giovanni's emotional "abstraction" or dual perspective is reinforced by the very concreteness of his strange new surroundings. And that abstraction, that double vision, is at its most emotional during those episodes that depict the exchange of letters between the lovers. The first letter that Giovanni receives, he reads in silence, with no clichéd soundtrack of the woman's voice. With other letters, we go in Giovanni's imagination to dream scenes where he sees Liliana speaking the words of the letters, as well as to re-creations of things she describes, all touched with delicacy, all conveying a sense that the director himself is on the verge of tears. But on the verge, only. It is such subtle or understated suggestion—maintained exquisitely throughout (as in the taut, short sequence in which, because he is leaving for Sicily, Giovanni puts his elderly father in a home)—that makes Olmi's film so extraordinarily affecting.

All of this, of course, would be for naught without the eternal freshness of the acting in *The Fiancés*. "I don't use a fig to make a pear," Olmi declared in the 2008 interview:

These people . . . bring to the film a weight, really a constitution of truth, which, provoked by the situations in which the characters find themselves, creates palpitations—those vibrations so right, so real, and therefore not repeatable. At the twentieth take the professional actor still cries. The real actor, the character taken from life, won't do more than four repetitions. It's like capturing a light: either you get it at that moment or you don't get it at all. (Cardullo, 27-28)

Carlo Cabrini as Giovanni and Anna Canzi as Liliana themselves give off authentic, and now everlasting, light.

Cabrini, for his part, has a stolid but sweet face, capable of the kind of self-concern that is assurance to a woman that she is getting a man, not a sop, yet without the consuming egotism that would only derogate her. He *does* carry himself with a stiffness that no professional actor would ever be able to make believable, but this is something we may all recognize from life: the stiffness of polite reserve. The same could be said of Canzi's lifelike worry and lack of composure, one step away from emotional dishevelment. She has a face that ranges in expression from the long-nosed, headachy opening shots, where she looks like a young lady with perennial indigestion, to the robust bloom of her natural Italian beauty during the scenes in which Giovanni "envisions" her. She is, of course, both persons; and Olmi has, in the best sense, put her as well as Cabrini at ease, thereby easing their essences onto film.

Descriptions of the acting in Olmi's movies, together with summaries of those films themselves, may make them sound a bit sketchy and arty, but they are in fact strong, warm, *continuous*. His perception of reality is intense—never arty or affected—yet he treats it with a fertile imagination not satisfied with mere documentation. And in this third feature of his, Olmi's imagination seems less concerned (as it was in *Il posto*) with the enmity of the machine age toward the human spirit, more with the way in which humanity endeavors to persist through it. (Much is made, for example, of the slowness of the "natural" Sicilians' adjustment to industrial life. When the plant first opened, the Sicilian workers—used to farming—stayed home on rainy days. And when a Sicilian girl comes for a job interview, her entire family accompanies her.)

Olmi is presumably saying, then, that the concrete runnels exist and these men must traverse them; but, from the supervisors to the workmen, there is some consciousness of this fact, which was not true of the characters in *Il posto*. The betrothal protracted by indigence, the couple separated by conventions of the era—these are not twentieth-century inventions (see, again, the novels of Manzoni), nor is industrialization itself for that matter. It was possible to endure difficulties and hardships before, and it may still be possible. In this way, Olmi seems to be telling us that the grim industrial plant, with its modern technology, is being sanctified if not softened by the spirit of the men who pass through it.

Whatever the case, and however one finally interprets *The Fiancés*, this is a man who moves through film like a bird through the air. With this singular difference: unlike the bird, Olmi leaves an imprint.

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## Richard Lester's *How I Won the War*

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No one has yet treated the Vietnam War directly (as opposed to metaphorically) as a black comedy—at least, not on film, with the possible exception of *Tropic Thunder* (2008). Vietnam, it seems, is still too delicate a subject to be given overt comic treatment in so popular a medium as the cinema; the war has nonetheless been receiving serious treatment on film at least since 1968, when Eugene S. Jones's documentary *A Face of War* appeared. In 1978 alone, we were given the following fiction features: *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, *The Boys in Company C*, and *Go Tell the Spartans*. In 1979, there was *Apocalypse Now*. And then in 1987 there were *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill*, and *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam*, to be followed by *Casualties of War* (1989), *Heaven and Earth* (1992), *A Bright Shining Lie* (1998), and *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

Indeed, as the second decade of the twenty-first century reaches its midpoint, we are not yet through taking Vietnam seriously—despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that other foreign wars (like the ones in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria) will rage, have raged, on average, about every sixteen years in American history. Nor *should* we be through taking Vietnam seriously, but doing so need not mean treating the war uncomically. And such directly humorous treatment, in the cool, objective, or distanced medium of comedy, seems called for at this juncture as a way not only of laughing while we are crying, but also of thinking as well as feeling, of reflecting on the horror and futility of war as much as mourning its sacrifices and suffering. This may not stop war, no, but it may alter how we imagine or conceive it—which is a start.

As for indirect comic treatments of the Vietnam War, we can turn to *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *Catch-22* (1970). On the surface, these two films are darkly satirical comedies about Korea and World War II, respectively, but each one was released at the height (or the depths) of the Vietnam War and was widely understood at the time to be an oblique comment on the then-current Asian conflict. The same is true for *How I Won the War* (1967), a British picture directed by the American Richard Lester before he turned, in the 1970s, to routine commercial assignments such as *The Three Musketeers* (1973), *Juggernaut* (1974), *Superman II* (1980), and *Finders Keepers* (1984). From 1964 to 1969, however, Lester employed the full cinematic arsenal of the French New Wave—slow motion and accelerated action, freeze frames and wide angles, jump cuts and zoom shots, flashbacks and flash-forwards, handheld camera work and every conceivable form of narrative displacement—to create a dazzling new kind of audiovisual comedy. I am thinking of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), *The Knack* (1965), and *The Bed-Sitting Room* (1969), the last of which is set in a devastated, distorted England three years after a nuclear war. But *How I Won the War* stands out even among this special group.



The trouble with talking about it merely as an anti-war movie of the blackly comic kind is that, while *How I Won the War* may be one of the most effective ever made, that does not begin to say anything about this film's real brilliance—and may even obscure it. Yes, the picture tells us that war is hell and that perhaps the most hellish aspect of it is that fundamentally men love it. But, despite some flaws, Lester's film has been important for some time now as a source of ideas and possibilities for film art, while his subject or target matters less and less. (Maybe because, even though Lester hit his target, that obviously has not stopped wars.) Very much unlike Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), whose theme and ideological setting are the only things that stay in one's memory, *How I Won the War* is a permanent accession to the imagination and one more demonstration of the way in which the art of cinema, more than any other form, has become the imagination's chief bulwark against the political chaos, moral terror, and collective insanity of the last (as well as the present) century.



### 39. *How I Won the War* (1967), dir. Richard Lester

War is there all right in this picture, and Lester's attitude toward it, as well as that of his screenwriter, the British dramatist Charles Wood (who adapted the script of *How I Won the War* from a novel by Patrick Ryan with an even busier disregard for the original than Wood showed for the source of *The Knack*—a play



by Ann Jellicoe—which he also adapted), has very much to do with this director's cinematic selections and maneuvers. But such aesthetic actions are not simply in the service of an anti-war attitude; Lester has not composed a work whose usefulness will be for a peace drive or a *putsch* against prevailing political, economic, and social structures. Rather, he has made a movie whose relevance is its intimation of the way war, or any phenomenon of violence, sensation, or evil, proceeds (with the aid of the media, especially these days) in its usurpation of truth and sentience. *How I Won the War* does this by extending the potential of cinema as a creator of counter statements, fecund myths whose weight may be used to neutralize, if not nullify, the power of all the destructive ones. In this sense the film is less against war than it is *for* the life of dignity through consciousness, or conscious choice.

On the surface, *How I Won the War* is in the traditions both of the satiric tale about a sad-sack outfit blundering its way through combat and of the indigenously British portrait of military pomposity as well as absurd, official *esprit de corps*. A rag-tag detachment of British soldiers under an Oxbridge lieutenant of appalling callowness and ferocious naïveté moves out on a hare-brained mission to prepare a cricket pitch in the North African desert, so that an English general will be able to play on it after he advances. From there, after fighting every inch of the way against any recognizable form of military achievement, the men move to the European front, where all but two die without having satisfied their only real ambition: to kill their abominable young officer, who survives along with the troop's sole coward.



#### 40. *How I Won the War* (1967), dir. Richard Lester

It is the goodhearted if mutton-headed lieutenant who “tells” the story in the form of his reminiscences, for the movie begins in early 1945 at the Rhine, where

he is captured; most of *How I Won the War* therefore occurs in flashback, from basic training up to and including the campaign in North Africa. But that is too formal a description, since there are no orthodox flashbacks: there is only an unremitting series of flashes—back, forward to the “present,” further forward to the future into fantasy or extrapolation. The present of 1945, moreover, includes the lieutenant’s dialogue—intercut with the main action—with a philosophical Nazi officer in a German prison camp. In the end, the two make a deal whereby the lieutenant “buys” the Remagen bridge—the last remaining one across the Rhine—from his German counterpart with a worthless check for 19,000 pounds. This is the way our hero “won” the war, for this is the way, across the bridge at Remagen, the Allied forces sped to victory. (As if on comic cue, a conventional war movie called *The Bridge at Remagen*, with an all-star cast, was made only two years after *How I Won the War*.)

Now insofar as it remains on the level of satire and irony, Lester’s movie is as effective as most items in its line, if not something truly astonishing. A good amount of the foolery is predictable—recruits march off in all directions during close-order drill, officers are shown gravely swapping bubble-gum war cards—but at least as much of it is novel and deft. For instance, a blimpish colonel gives the lieutenant a gung-ho speech in a dugout; but when the camera pulls back at the end of his exhortation, the dugout—suddenly—is on a stage, and the curtain descends as the colonel finishes roundly. It is true that this device is not new: there is a lame application of it at the start of the French film *Bon Voyage* (2003) and a relentless use of it throughout Ernst Lubitsch’s *To Be or Not to Be* (1942). But Lester does not leave his version onstage, so to speak: the audience in the theater, which we see, is sparse and its applause is slack. That is the real joke.

Verbally, the humor of *How I Won the War* is often characterized by a Beatles-like, knowing innocence. (John Lennon, playing a Cockney private, is the only actual Beatle in the film, but certain flavors of *A Hard Day’s Night* are strongly detectable throughout.) “We’re all going to die under funny names,” someone says, a remark that can serve beautifully as the entire work’s incisive motto and imaginative rallying cry. Yet in the same piercingly comic way, Lester is also very touching. As when one soldier, severely wounded in the legs, is left lying in the sands and starts talking deliriously to his wife. We then see her walk up the dune in her London housedress. There is no misty fade-in—this woman just ascends the sandy slope mouthing BBC platitudes and starts to comfort her husband as if he had sprained his ankle on the front step. “It hurts, Flo,” the man says quietly. “Run them under the cold tap, love,” she says equally quietly.

“Touching” is not what I would call Wood and Lester’s portrait of the lieutenant, but it is a complex creation, drawing some of its elements from an expected vein of lore—the eager young fool whose less educated men are much

wiser than he—yet entering an arena that is far deeper and more resonant. A gangling, fresh-faced, “lovable” youth, this lieutenant is the terrifying incarnation of received idealism and absolutely solipsistic evaluation of the world—the stuff of which, it must be said, lieutenants have perennially been made. To wit, he says of his officer’s shoulder insignia, “They’re the nicest things that have ever happened to me.” And after his men have shot down a British plane, he exults, “Our first real victory! One of ours, of course, but still our first real victory.” Later, however, his parodic deployment is modulated into a profoundly cynical construction, as the lieutenant says the following to his amicable German jailer: “I’m not sorry about my men . . . they all had the same faces . . . there it was for them, a crusade against tyranny . . . and they didn’t respond.”

What continues to make *How I Won the War* so radically contemporary, however, is not so much a matter of advanced cynicism or disabused politics as of an aesthetic consciousness trained searchingly on all the sanctified modes of depicting war in both movie entertainment and film art. Thus Lester makes continual use of war movies of several kinds, for purposes more extreme than satire. For one example, the nutty band of Britishers marches into the camp of a much larger force of Germans and cows them by its energetic whistling of the theme song from *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957). In a far subtler move, a serious, *thoughtful* film like *Grand Illusion* (1937) is itself mocked for its claim to present a vision above the battle, or against all war, by being parodied in *How I Won the War* through the lieutenant’s verbally sophisticated exchanges with his Nazi “comrade.”

By such actions Lester keeps himself from merely telling another story whose effectiveness will depend on what we already think or feel, or wish to be told, about war. Instead, he is enabled to tell a *story about storytelling*, about the way war, or any public event of significance in our lives, is prevented from reaching our minds and imaginations in its true lineaments through being continually proffered in the shape of consoling myths—myths that, again, are continually being reinforced by all the news media as well as every entertainment outlet. Lester employs two other, related techniques to prevent his film from becoming either outright satire (a genre that has been pretty well exhausted with regard to war) or simply bizarre, wised-up movie spoof (of the kind still very much on view in our contemporary cinema), and so as to move *How I Won the War* to a level of new, arresting, and significant cinematic statement. Neither technique was wholly original at the time—echoes of Fellini, Godard, Resnais, and Bergman sound from time to time—yet in this director’s hands the borrowings become almost entirely organic and justified.

First, Lester never asks his actors to impersonate characters in the double sense of being members of a group of *dramatis personae* charged with advancing

a preordained narrative and of constituting a gallery of democratically conceived personalities-in-action: hero, lover, fat man, bully, and other types such as compose the casts of more movies than I would like to remember. Differentiated from one another as it suits their director, they nevertheless are allowed to engage in sudden, atypical or inconsistent actions—speaking out of turn, snatching up outlandish costumes and objects as though from an obliging wardrobe mistress or prop man, being by turns professionally actor-like and self-consciously amateurish, even stepping out of the film to address the audience. When, for instance, one of the men becomes hysterical, another soldier turns to the audience (or the film crew) and angrily exclaims, “Would you be so kind as to take that camera away?” Then, as in the aforementioned cut to the miniscule audience in a playhouse, we flash to a shot of two Cockney biddies in a movie theater watching the awful scene in total comfort.

This continual breaking up of the fictitious-cum-parabolic receives its most vigorous impulse from Lester’s brilliant use of newsreel sequences from World War II. On a minimal base of actual footage, he has constructed extraordinarily convincing imitations (especially considering the year in which *How I Won the War* was made) of some famous scenes—the beach at Dunkirk, the decimated commanders returning from Dieppe—into which his and Wood’s fictionalized characters blend. Lester’s cinematographer, David Watkin (who worked with him on a number of other pictures as well), shot the fictionalized troop’s ludicrous exploits in color and the context of “real” war (reportedly, only eighty-two feet of actual clips were used) in black-and-white (sometimes tinted); whenever the troop moves into the “real” war, so too do they move into black-and-white. These documentary-like sequences have enormous impact, not because they are offered in contrast to the invented story, with the real chastening the imagined. They have such impact because, as history, they also are seen to be imaginary now—legends of the late war—and can only recover their actuality, if you will, through insertion into a process of conscious art-making. (In much the same way, legendary modern industrial or commercial products assumed a new and revived reality in the creations of pop art.) In a masterly stroke, Lester completes the intercourse between history and art by having figures from the “newsreels” (again, a mixture of the real and the fabricated), soldiers painted in the pink or green or sepia colors in which the black-and-white sequences were tinted, join the fictitious characters as additions to their ranks.

The effect is to change our perception of both art and history. Many of the real men who died during World War II were taken up into art (as casualties in fiction films as well as non-fiction ones), and now the imaginary men of *How I Won the War* will die and be assumed into reality, as it were, by coming back in the tinted colors of the newsreels. Thus each time a member of the

troop is killed, he reappears, shortly thereafter, clad entirely in one color, and he remains with his comrades in his new color. The first dead man comes back in green—entirely green, including a green silk stocking over his face. He simply appears, is paid no special attention by the others, and carries on with his duties. The only acknowledgment of his “difference” occurs when the lieutenant, addressing his men, strides past them, turns back to the green man, and says, “Do you think you ought to report sick?” By the end there are pink and green and other-colored soldiers, all dead, yet all continuing as comical objects, objects of comedy, and Brechtian devices of seriocomic defamiliarization.

As John Lennon, for one, sits on the ground with blood issuing shockingly from his stomach, he tells us, “You didn’t expect this, did you?” (To see *How I Won the War* today is to be grateful that no camera was present when Lennon was shot to death on a New York street—shockingly, four times in the back—by a deranged fan in 1980.) What we had not expected was that, all along, the film was preparing to be more real than its subject, through its liberating manipulating of fictions as well as through its plundering of history so as to invent it again, and thereby prevent it from continuing to invent (and thus to justify) itself. And history, for Lester and Wood, clearly included the Vietnam War that was raging at the time. For near the end of the picture, one of the revenants from a newsreel sequence remarks to another that “there’s a war shaping up in Vietnam; do you think you’ll be in it?” To which the reply is, “No, I don’t like the director.”

With such freedom and yet purpose, the actors in this film seem at once merely to be their director’s instruments and majestically to give excellent performances. They include Michael Crawford, as the piping lieutenant; Michael Hordern, as the impenetrable colonel; Roy Kinnear, doing a comic version of the fat Tommy he played in Sidney Lumet’s *The Hill* (1965); Jack McGowran, as a former music-hall comic whose “turns” keep turning up surrealistically in the desert; and Lennon, the Beatle on leave as the infantryman Gripweed—each one of them coolly insane. Lee Montagu, as the corporal, is sane, but, in this milieu, hopelessly so. All these performers know they are in a film and communicate that to us (which is a bit different from a *director’s* reminding us that he is making a film and we are watching one), at the same time as they convincingly “narrate” their characters—which neatly fulfills the definition of “epic” acting as Brecht conceived it. (Brecht conceived of such acting, furthermore, for his so-called “epic theater,” which, like *How I Won the War*, is anything but epic in the traditional sense—grand, heroic, expansive, awe-inspiring, noble . . . and finally pompous.)





#### 41. *How I Won the War* (1967), dir. Richard Lester

A film that takes as many risks as *How I Won the War* is bound to have shortcomings or lapses, and they amounted then (as now) to enough to constitute disenchantment in some critical eyes. One source of negative reaction continues to be Lester's hyper-fertility, his jack-rabbit proliferation of gestures, images, actions, and events. (A number of incidents are even speedily replayed in different settings.) For there are times when your attention is shredded by too much business, or occluded by rapid-fire and nearly incoherent transitions from one mode of cinematic discourse to another. Beyond this, the film is marred by an occasional glibness, a lack of full concentration on the exactly right thing instead of the merely serviceable thing. Perhaps even more centrally, the picture suffers from an incomplete emotional commitment to its materials—the very kind of emotional commitment to be found in the scene between the injured soldier and his London housewife. No one is asking for more sentiment from Lester, *à la* Steven Spielberg, but a little soul might have helped.

Yet, build the case against it as strongly as you will, *How I Won the War* survives any indictment. It pays the costs of newness, but Lester's creation makes a reputedly revolutionary film like Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*—which was released in the same year, 1967—seem traditional and unadventurous (even sentimental) by comparison. *How I Won the War* is morally shocking, in the most serious sense, in the way that Penn's movie had only hoped to be (or was only for a very short time), and it lends itself to serious debate—not to mod fashion knock-offs or pop music spin-offs. The picture is neither immoral nor amoral, however, and it is brilliantly, scathingly put—primarily by the camera, which is the only thing in which Lester



seems completely to believe. (By contrast, an anomaly of Lester's from the sixties, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* [1966, to be precise], was a disaster because a vehicle for utterly theatrical stars ran headlong into a director for whom the camera is the star.) That camera is the originator here of a fireworks display which, far from being a gratuitous cinematic spectacle of the kind to which we are now all too well accustomed, spells out some well-kept secrets of its, and our, time.

What makes *How I Won the War* unique, however, is that when it is not (occasionally) straining to be funny, it is *genuinely* not funny: the kind of comedy at which one does not laugh. *How I Won the War*'s comedy thus seems to take place in a cavern of ice where all the laughter has already been laughed, has been caught, and is now frozen in glittering, frightening stalactites. Which means, in a sense, that it is grinning back at you—through a glass, darkly.

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## Robert Bresson's *A Gentle Creature*

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All of Robert Bresson's features after *Angels of the Streets* (1943) have literary antecedents of one form or another. Two are from Dostoevsky (*Une Femme douce* [*A Gentle Creature*, 1969], *Four Nights of a Dreamer* [1971]), two from Bernanos (*Mouchette* [1967], *Diary of a Country Priest* [1951]), one from Tolstoy (*L'Argent* [1983]), and one from Diderot (*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* [1945]), while *A Man Escaped* (1956) and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962) are based on written accounts of true events. In addition, *Pickpocket* (1959) is clearly influenced by Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966) has a premise similar to the same author's *The Idiot*. *Lancelot du Lac* (1974), for its part, is derived from Sir Thomas Malory's Arthurian legends, while *The Devil Probably* (1977) was inspired by a newspaper report, as stated at the start of the film. Even a longstanding, unrealized film project of Bresson's was to come from a literary source—in this case, the Book of Genesis (*Genèse*).

I would like to reconsider here what I believe to be Bresson's most underrated film from a literary source: *Une Femme douce*, or *A Gentle Creature*, his first work in color and his ninth film, after the 1876 novella by Dostoevsky (sometimes called *A Gentle Spirit*). Bresson regarded Dostoevsky as the world's greatest novelist, doubtless for his spiritual strain—an almost existential one, in contrast with the sentimental religiosity of Tolstoy—because Bresson avoids the Russian's preoccupation with truth and his probing of human psychology. Put another way, this most Catholic of filmmakers (French or otherwise) always forbids the surface as well as the depths of naturalism from distracting us from the mystical moments in his films, which cannot be explicated or revealed in any positivistic manner.

Those moments, to be sure, involve cinematic characters, but Bresson makes us focus, not on the story in the human beings on screen, but on the human beings in the story and their sometimes complete lack of connection to or understanding of what happens to them. Bresson almost disconnects character from story in this way. His is an extreme reaction to decades of “dramatic” pictures, where character is action and action character; “action” movies, in which the characters are designed to fit the exciting plot; and films “of character,” where the plot is designed to present interesting characters—those with a “story,” that is. To the oversimplifications of character of the cinema before him, Bresson responds by not simplifying anything, by explaining almost nothing. To the self-obsession of the Hollywood star system, the “dream factory,” Bresson responds in the extreme by calling for complete self-denial on the part of his actors. (Hence his designation of them as “models” [*Notes on Cinematography*, 1].)

Let us begin simply with the plot of *A Gentle Creature*, so that we can instructively compare what Bresson and Dostoevsky do with more or less the same series of events. A contemporary young woman, unnamed, of uncertain background and insufficient means, for no apparent reason marries a pawnbroker, also unnamed, whom she meets in his shop. She tells this man that she does not love him, and she makes it very clear that she disdains him, and all, money; if she is marrying to escape her origins, it remains unclear exactly what those origins were and why she is choosing to escape them in this particular way. The woman (as she is called in the credits, like “the man”) and her husband go through periods of much unhappiness—we even see her with another man at one point, but we cannot be sure that she has been unfaithful—and some calm. Then she nearly shoots her spouse to death in his sleep. Later she becomes quite ill, and, once she recovers, matters appear to be righting themselves between her and her husband. Nonetheless, she proceeds to jump to her death from the balcony of their Paris apartment.

The plot of Dostoevsky’s novella, *A Gentle Spirit*, is substantially similar to this one, allowing for differences in time (mid-to-late nineteenth century) and place (the harsh Russian countryside), with one major exception: the young wife in Dostoevsky’s narrative is initially very loving toward her husband, with the result that the main turns of the above plot are easily explained. The husband in the novella—he is the narrator both of the novella and of Bresson’s film—distrusts, out of his own perverse obsession with verifiable as opposed to intuited truth (his Dostoevskyan surge, if you will), his wife’s love for him, so he decides to test it. He is cold toward her and holds over her head the fact that he has rescued her from her poor beginnings. For these reasons, she eventually comes to hate her husband and almost to commit adultery. Finally, she is even ready to shoot him. With his wife’s gun at his temple, the man awakens but does not move. Yet, she cannot fire. A religious woman, she feels great remorse and atones for her “sin” by leaping to her death while clutching a Christian icon. The wife in fact is lying on her bier at the beginning of the novella with her husband at her side, reviewing his marriage in an attempt to understand why she committed suicide. What he winds up understanding is that his own contrariness is the cause of all his unhappiness, and that all men live in unbreachable solitude.

Any such explanations of what happens in *A Gentle Creature*, however, pale beside the facts—and the facts are almost all Bresson gives us (here as elsewhere in his *oeuvre*) and all that we should consider if we are to be able to interpret his film justly. One fact that critics have inexplicably ignored, and that I take to be the foundation of any sound interpretation of *A Gentle Creature*, is the young woman’s declaration in the beginning that she does not love the man she

intends to marry. Put another way, it is not at all clear *why* she marries him (*her* Dostoevskyan surge, in opposition to the husband's in Dostoevsky's novella), and certainly the sum of the evidence points to the conclusion that they are so different from each other as to be nearly exact opposites. (No, the "opposites attract" theory of romance does not work here, for nothing the young woman does indicates that she is even attracted to the pawnbroker, let alone in love with him.) The pawnbroker, for his part, although he may wish to marry this woman, does not make known why, after so many years of bachelorhood, he suddenly wants to wed someone about whom he knows so little. (Bresson makes him forty or so and gives him a live-in maid-cum-assistant whom, significantly, he does not dismiss after his marriage.) Certainly he gets little or no response from his fiancée, however much he may think he loves her, and they could hardly be said to carry on anything resembling a courtship.

In a word, these two are simply not meant for each other, and I am maintaining that Bresson makes sure we know this right from the start. Bresson's subject is thus not the rise and fall of a modern marriage, say, on account of financial problems or sexual infidelity (as it is Germaine Dulac's subject in *La souriante Madame Beudet* [1922], a kind of early feminist film that deals with the problem of a husband's economic domination of his wife, and to which, in letter but not in spirit, *A Gentle Creature* bears some resemblance). The couple in *A Gentle Creature* do not even fall out in direct conflict with each other over a genuine issue that is raised in the film: the spiritually transcendent way of life over the material driven one. These two are fallen out, as it were, when they first meet.

What Bresson does in *A Gentle Creature*, then, is the reverse of what Dostoevsky does in *A Gentle Spirit*. The latter has the husband test the love of his wife and conclude that all human beings live in unbreachable solitude. Bresson has the husband and wife living in unbreachable solitude from the start and tests the duty, if not the love, toward them of the maid Anna, the character whom Bresson adds and purposefully names so that she will stand in for us, the audience. (Although Bresson could just as easily have had the husband narrate the story of his marriage alone and unseen, in intermittent voiceover, he has us watch the husband tell it to Anna in the same room where his wife's corpse lies on their marital bed; like the wife's body lying in the street after she jumps to her death, which we see at the *start* of the film, this is another telling image—the dead woman juxtaposed against the (re)union of man and maid—of the end-of-the-marriage-in-its-beginning.) Whereas Dostoevsky had used the spiritual to express the nihilistic, Bresson thus uses the nihilistic to express the spiritual.



**42. *A Gentle Creature* (1969), dir. Robert Bresson**

Let me go into some detail as to how he does this, chiefly by concentrating on the contrast between the figures of the man and the woman. Since most of what we learn about her is designed solely to establish how different from the pawnbroker she is, she does not add up to a unified character of depth and originality, or “color,” with whom we can readily identify. She walks into the pawnbroker’s shop, and immediately the otherwise beautiful Dominique Sanda, in her first screen role (and giving more of a “performance” here than Bresson usually allowed his “models”), is unsympathetic: her clothing is drab, her hair is disheveled, she makes very little eye-contact with anyone, and her walk has about it at the same time a timidity and an urgency that make it unnerving.

The pawnbroker, by contrast, is meticulous in appearance, sparing in gesture, and steady in his walk; he looks directly at all whom he encounters (whereas his customers avert his gaze), but with eyes that one cannot look into and a face that, eerily, is neither handsome nor plain. This is clearly a man (as “modeled” by Guy Frangin) who “understands” the world and how to get along in it, as opposed to being “had” by it: money is everything to him, and what cannot be seen, touched, and stored is not worth talking about (which is one of the reasons, as he himself says, that he is unable to pray). He accumulates item after item in his pawnshop, yet we never see him sell anything: he likes his money, but apparently he likes his “things,” too. His wife, on the other hand, gives away his money for worthless objects when she is working in the pawnshop; before she was married, she pawned her own last possessions in order to get a few more books to read. Her husband, for his part, has shelves of books, not one of which we ever see him take down to read.

He likes them for their “thingness,” yet he will not read those books so as to rise above the world of things. The woman longs to do so, but realizes that, as a human being, she can only achieve her goal to a limited extent. She indirectly reveals this knowledge when, early in *A Gentle Creature*, she declares, “We’re all—men and animals—composed of the same matter, the same raw materials.” Later we have this truism visually confirmed when the young woman and her husband visit a museum of natural history, where she goes on to ask, “Do birds learn to sing from their parents, or is the ability to sing present in them at birth?” The wife yearns beyond a universe in which all is such nature, nurture, *matter*, and where human beings themselves frequently seem to behave in a preconditioned manner: preconditioned to beautify the self, to marry, to reproduce, to gather wealth and possessions, to enter society, et cetera.

Throughout the film the suggestion is that, himself obsessed with possessing matter (including his wife, or her body), the husband responds to situations in a preconditioned or “correct” manner, whereas his wife responds in the most unforeseen, and sometimes bizarre, of ways. Indeed, almost all her behavior in *A Gentle Creature* is choreographed according to this ideal of the unexpected or the gratuitous. When she and her husband enter their bedroom on their wedding night, for example, the young woman quickly turns on the television set but does not watch it. The man does, but what he sees could be called the image of his own dead-end behavior pattern: cars racing in a circle. (He drives an automobile, she does not.) Later the husband will watch *horses* racing around a track on the same television, then World War II fighter planes themselves flying round in endless circles as they try to out-maneuver one another in dogfights.

Meanwhile, incongruously, the wife nearly runs about the room in preparation for bed, wrapped in a towel that dislodges itself by accident as opposed to being dislodged in an act of sexual enticement. At one point she carelessly tosses her nightgown onto the bed, in much the same way she will leave underclothes strewn about it during the day and scatters her books everywhere, showing no respect for the material, for objects or possessions. At another point, this young woman takes a bath but does not drain the dirty water and even leaves the faucet running, which her husband then turns off. Moreover, she spurns money yet likes to eat fancy pastries; she enjoys jazz but plays Bach and Purcell, too. The wife wants a bouquet so much she goes as far as to pick sunflowers alongside a road, then quickly tosses them away when she sees that, nearby, some couples are gathering their own bouquets of sunflowers.

This woman is different even in dying. (Her suicide ends as well as begins the film.) We do not get her point of view of the street before she leaps from the balcony, nor do we await her fall from below, from the position where she will soon find herself. As the wife jumps in daylight, we “innocently” see a potted



plant fall off the small table from which she leaped, we watch the table topple over, and we are given a slow-motion shot of her shawl floating discursively to the ground after her—as if it were both her surviving soul or spirit and a final reminder of the unpredictability of her human nature—to be followed by a series of shadows and feet that flutter toward her dead body. (She placed a white shawl around her shoulders before jumping, even as she fingered the Christ figure retained from the gold crucifix she had pawned at her future husband’s shop.) Off-camera during her fall, the young woman lands in the street, cars screech to a halt, and we await her husband’s discovery of her death.

If, even in suicide, the wife’s behavior has not been categorizable, has once again been somewhere “in between”—we can never predict quite where, we do not know quite why—then Bresson’s camera itself is always literally somewhere in between, except when it is teasing us with a subjective camera-placement or point-of-view shot. (As when the man and woman, together with us, attend a French movie called *Benjamin* [1968]—a costume drama trading on the wiles of love—and a production of *Hamlet*, i.e., the kinds of narratives or dramas, unlike *A Gentle Creature*, we are accustomed to seeing and hearing, in which we are more or less easily able to identify with the characters, their worlds, their experiences.) There are many shots of doors, of empty stairways, of the objects filling the pawnbroker’s shop and his apartment. The camera is also “in between” in its representation of people: we get hands and arms cut off bodies, bodies cut off from heads, just torsos, just feet. As usual in his work, Bresson thus makes matter of the human body, even as he films the material world, the literal distance between the husband and the wife, as much to bring this matter to (spiritual) life as to emphasize the fact that these two people live in unbreachable solitude, on either side of a great chasm. The last shot of *A Gentle Creature* is of the lid to the woman’s coffin being screwed tight, as the material world—the actual coffin lid, the world of things which she has at last transcended—continues to separate her, in death, from her husband, just as it did in life.

If these two characters are so permanently “separated” or irreconcilably different, one might ask, why did they choose to get married? I do not know; I do not think that they know (if they do, they do not tell us); and Bresson does not care because, as I have more than suggested, this couple’s “psychology” is not the focus of *A Gentle Creature*. Perhaps the man and the woman get together out of their own perversity, but the film does not contain this idea: it just does not contradict it. Just as it does not contradict the possibility that the young woman marries the pawnbroker only because it is the unexpected thing to do. For Bresson, then, their marriage is not a relationship to be explored, but instead a device to be used.



**43. *A Gentle Creature* (1969), dir. Robert Bresson**

To wit: marriage is universally perceived to be the most intimate state in which two people can live, and Bresson counterpoints this perception of ours with the almost total lack of intimacy that exists between the husband and the wife in his film. In other words, the director does not allow us to identify with the marriage of the pawnbroker and the young woman, to see ourselves in them, because he does not indicate that they marry for the reasons *we* usually associate with marrying: love, money, convenience, convention, children. They wed, they are unhappy, they reach a fragile understanding, then she kills herself. The husband, in his narration—it is not narration in the proper sense, but more on this later—attempts to discover why his wife committed suicide, but he cannot find an answer. He does not know why she killed herself, nor do we, and neither does Bresson.

My point is not that every human action in *A Gentle Creature* is without explanation, without cause or motive—for instance, the wife's near murder of her husband after he discovers her with another man *can* be accounted for—but that these individual explanations become beside the point when one considers that there is no explanation in the film as to why the pawnbroker and the young woman got married in the first place. What becomes important, therefore, is not so much their relationship with each other as our relationship with each of them, and Anna's with the pawnbroker. This is why the camera shifts periodically from *its* illustration of past events to the husband pacing back and forth in the bedroom in the present, telling *his* story of the marriage: not only to point up that *neither* narrative account provides the "answers," but also to emphasize that this man, as character or person apart from his story, is the proper focus of our concerns. As is his wife, literally apart from her story in death, lying in the road at the beginning of the film even as she lies there at its conclusion.

Clearly, then, Bresson wants more from us than our “understanding” of the husband and wife’s relationship, our feeling sorry for them for their frailties and obsessions, because ultimately this is only feeling sorry for ourselves; or it is making these characters do the work of our living, which is too easy. The remarkable aspect of this film is that we do much of the feeling and querying for the actors, not in identification with them as they do it, but *in their place*: we feel and query for them as we imagine they would. And this has the effect of making us think absolutely about their situation, instead of about theirs plus our own. Bresson, in this way, wants us to feel for and care about characters whom we do not “recognize,” who reveal as little that is “like us” as possible, namely, the heights and depths of strong emotion: love, hate, anger, regret, happiness, sadness.

To this end, Bresson forces his actors to deny themselves in their portrayal of their characters. He denies *himself* in his shooting of these characters: for the most part, the camera is held steady in the middle distance, there is no panning or tracking, and there are no high- and low-angle shots—objectivity or distance that Bresson can afford because of the very lack of appeal of his main characters. The director asks us in turn to deny ourselves in our perception of these characters and their actions. He demands that we pay attention to the husband and wife for themselves, no matter how uninviting or inexpressive they may appear, no matter how their story resembles little more than a skimpy newspaper report.

The fact that, as in the case of *A Gentle Creature*, Bresson almost always made his films from preexisting texts should be a signal that he was not interested in the creation of original character for its own sake, or even in the re-creation of traditionally arresting and appealing character (which is one reason we never learn the name of the husband or wife). The fact that he frequently began his films by telling us what would happen at the end should be a signal, as well: that he was not primarily concerned to tell stories for the suspense they could create. Related to this, the effect of having the husband narrate parts of the story to Anna, the enactment of which parts we then see in flashback, is less to show us discrepancies in the husband’s version as compared with “what really happened,” than to obliterate the newness or freshness of story, the interest in it per se—precisely through the filming of both the husband’s narration and its subsequent repetition in action instead of words.

Bresson asks us, not to fully fathom this “double-narrative,” to decipher the how and why of the whole story, but simply to believe that it occurred and to take witness if not pity. His is a nearly perverse demand, which is to say a kind of religious one. If we can comply and perform the requisite act of faith, of utter selflessness, together with a leap of the imagination, *A Gentle Creature* becomes for us something resembling a religious or spiritual experience. It becomes an experience, moreover, that also teaches an important aesthetic lesson: that we must acknowledge the existence of the inexplicable in, as well as beyond, art.

According to this view, it is art's job not to make people and the world more intelligible than they are, but instead to re-present their mystery or ineffableness, their integrity or irreducibility, if you will, their connection to something irretrievably their own or some other's—like God himself. (I am not the first to assert that Bresson invokes mystery or "otherness" in *A Gentle Creature*, as in a number of his films; but I differ with other critics in my suggestion that Bresson is invoking mystery not for mystery's sake alone, but for the sake of exalting the human, of calling his audience's attention at once to the magisterially divine and the intrinsically worthy in all human beings.) All may not be grace for the young woman at the end of *A Gentle Creature*, then, as it was for the *curé* of Ambricourt at the conclusion of Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*, who utters these words of spiritual certitude ("All is grace") as he is dying. But all is not nothingness, either.

Anna the maid seems to have learned the lesson of inexplicability or irreducibility from life rather than art, for she knows as little as we do about the motives for, and causes of, the husband's and the wife's behavior, yet she utters not one querying or querulous word to either of them in the course of the picture. Indeed, Anna utters only a few lines through all of *A Gentle Creature*. Yes, she is the couple's maid, but her silence and impassivity (especially as she is played by Jane Lobre) here appear to go beyond the call of a servant's duty. Before the end of the film, Anna leaves the room in which she has quietly listened to the husband's narrative of his and his wife's relationship, but she will not leave him. She will remain with him during and after the funeral of the young woman because, as the husband himself admits, *he will need her*.

Bresson, by implication, asks the same of us: that, figuratively speaking, we do not desert this man in his time of need, that we recognize his humanity despite the fact we cannot comprehend his, or his marriage's deepest secrets. If there is anyone in *A Gentle Creature* with whom we should "identify," then, it is Anna. And if it can be said we identify with the husband and wife at all, it is in the sense, as I have implied, that they seem as puzzled by what is happening to them as we are. This is not only character almost disconnected from story, it is character nearly disconnected from *self*. Thus, are we disconnected from *our* selves, our certain egos, and made to look, not for the moral or balance in the story, the symmetry of feeling and form, of ideas and execution, but simply and inescapably for the only remaining tie that binds us to the characters depicted on screen: the human one, or the only one that cannot be explained away.

As one can doubtless deduce from my concentration above on *A Gentle Creature*'s method, Bresson's films are even more distinguished for their method or their style than for their individual subject matter. That is because Bresson's subjects pale beside his treatment of them, so much so that it is almost as if the director were making the same movie time after time. How ironic, or perhaps appropriate, that he filmed number nine in color (though elegantly understated

or “innocent” color it is, as photographed by Ghislain Cloquet) because, as he later wrote in *Notes on Cinematography* (1975), he felt color was more true to life (55). Like André Bazin’s true filmmaker, Bresson thus attained his power through his method, which is less a thing literally to be described or expressed (as in such terms as color, deep focus, handheld camera work, and long takes) than an inner orientation enabling an outward quest. That quest, in Bresson’s case, is (this is not too strong) to honor God’s universe by using film to render the reality of that universe, and, through its reality, both the miracle of its creation and the mystery of its being.

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## INTERLUDE: “WHY WRITING ABOUT GODARD AND BUÑUEL IS PREFERABLE TO WRITING ABOUT THE NEW AMERICAN CINEMA, 1965-1974”

By 1970, it is worth reminding ourselves at the outset, film's recognition as an art form had not been in question for some time. Yet, film, as it was mostly being made above ground in the United States at that moment, had very little aesthetic identity in the minds of its chief practitioners and enthusiasts, or at any rate its most vocal ones. There are more ironies than one here: unquestionably better, more mature, more salient and thematically sophisticated as many of America's new films had become, superior as a class as they were to the great bulk of American movies for a generation, they caused an excitement, an intensity and vigor of response, much beyond what was then accorded the current theater or new fiction. But this had almost nothing to do with any perennial or universal conceptions of “art” and almost everything to do with political, sociological, and psychological phenomena that are either indifferent or actively hostile to such conceptions.

Let us call the New American Cinema of this period, the late sixties and early seventies, the cinema of make-believe meaning. Changes in the United States connected with sex, race, gender, and class (“women's liberation,” “gay liberation,” birth control, abortion rights, minority rights, opposition to the Vietnam War, the lifting of censorship restrictions)—that is, with anti-authoritarianism directed at the patriarchal “Establishment”—had, inevitably, changed the tone of its film industry. A liberal, college-bred generation of producers and directors (and screenwriters and publicists) had come into being—men quite different in self-estimate and hunger for status from the first few generations of American film practitioners. This latest filmmaking generation that had come to power (to *power*—quite unlike small independent or “underground” filmmakers) operated comfortably within a cosmos of intense commercial pressure to which these men



had nicely adjusted their ambitions for intellectual prestige. But this reconciliation prevented them from making the sheer entertainments, comic or serious, of the palmy Hollywood days—the “sincere” days, as Jean-Luc Godard once described them with peculiar accuracy (cited in Morrison, 173); and, of course, such a compromise also prevented fidelity to art and intellect. What we got were entertainment films on which “meaning” was either grossly impasted or clung to only as long as convenient.

Robert Mulligan’s film of *Up the Down Staircase* (1967), for example, took several of the harshest problems of urban education and faced them with new, contemporary honesty—until it turned its back on them. From a reverse angle, the Western became adult in the form of Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969), and the crime film became Freud-Marxist in Arthur Penn’s *Mickey One* (1965), so that we could go to Westerns and crime films without skulking embarrassedly in and out of the theater. Even the glossy marital comedy (Stanley Donen’s *Two for the Road* [1967]) pilfered just enough from the new French film art so that we could know we were “keeping up” as well as enjoying ourselves. (It even got praised for this pilfering as proof that the commercial film was maturing.)

Moreover, however visually acute these American directors had become, even visually they betrayed themselves by trying to give weight to flimsy material with otherwise superb cinematography (such as Haskell Wexler’s for a gimmicky race-relations thriller, *In the Heat of the Night* [1967], directed by Norman Jewison). They used close-ups that were meant to seem unconventionally truthful but that dared nothing and said nothing (like a dead dog’s paw or a singing convict’s mouth in Stuart Rosenberg’s *Cool Hand Luke* [1967]). And these directors strained to include entire sequences that were only inserted “arias” for the cameraman, as was the Parker family reunion in Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Or, again as in the case of *Bonnie and Clyde*, they struggled to contrive an overall moral statement in the visual aesthetics of their own filming.

Consider the last scene in Penn’s movie, when the hero and heroine drive into an ambush and are machine-gunned to death. It is a long scene, showing the two characters riddled with bullets, blood spurting out of dozens of punctures, their bodies writhing in death-agony as they are cast up by the force of the repeated bullet impacts. And yet, and yet . . . it is all so Beautiful, shot as it is in italicizing, aestheticizing slow motion, and featuring two Beautiful People, the actors Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty, in the roles of Bonnie and Clyde. There is a dance-like quality to this scene and, besides that, a sensual rhythm of intercourse—of the two bodies in their coupled rising and falling. Here are the grace, the sexual release, and the lyricism that our heroes were really aiming for as they committed criminal mayhem across the American Southwest. This sensual, choreographed, almost beatific scene does not, however, exactly match up with the contemporary photographs of the event or with the homely looks, let alone the psychopathic

natures, of the historic figures of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow. It is certainly so much a violation of the moral implications of the film's earlier scenes—in which innocent people are killed and their money or property stolen—that it can only be called an instance of supreme, not to say divine, decadence.

Of extremely uneven worth, movies like *Bonnie and Clyde*, and like the following group of films, not by accident all from the same year—*Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Medium Cool* (1969), *Coming Apart* (1969), *Alice's Restaurant* (1969), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Putney Swope* (1969), and *Downhill Racer* (1969)—all of these were united in recommending themselves, or being recommended, as sophisticated agents of seized truth, windows on an actual world, which, stripped of illusions and “false” stories, surrendered itself to the camera as to a long-awaited suitor whose triumphant virtue is his realism. These films shrugged off the consequences of presenting themselves as imagination in the act of containing the history of the age as it makes itself. We were meant to believe that we would be unable to know that history without them, without their realism, and, more than that, we were meant to believe that we were assured a species of power over that history by having had it placed in front of us in this way.

By “history” I mean the sum total of moral and psychic, as well as political and social, events—human existence on the level of actuality before imagination begins to operate. Now it is always difficult to separate the aesthetic from the all too human and material in works of imagination (criticism can perhaps best be defined as the activity that attempts to accomplish such a feat), but this is especially difficult to do in relation to films, since they traffic with actuality in such a way and to such an extent as to put us under the continual temptation of seeing them as the recorder, interpreter, and, much more decisively, the legitimator of reality. Or, rather, this is one temptation; another and related one is that of seeing them as the validator (or even the source) of the myths which rise up from actuality, become indistinguishable from it, and in fact become, in great sectors of our consciousness and behavior, new actualities themselves. But whether it was dealing open-eyed and realistically with the way the world looks and was therefore supposed to be, or transcribing various dreams about it, American film at this particular moment in its own history—from around 1965 to 1974—tempted us into thinking of it as a chief supplier of the most useful and unmediated truths about society and the age.

Against similar temptations we at least partly managed to allow music, dance, painting, sculpture, poetry, even drama—but not fiction, the art form closest to film—to retain independent qualities and autonomous being, to establish their existences at strategic distances from our own, to be actualizations of what is not otherwise present in reality; to be, finally, increments, augmentations, previously unheard of alternatives or alternative “facts.” But film, that medium the first stage

in whose operation is to grant our eyes access to the visible world, was more and more being arrested at this stage, being asked to give us not new perception so much as a copybook of the world as we already thought or suspected it to exist.

After all, what did we mean by the cant declaration that “film is the art of our time” except that film is particularly suited to the age, coherent with its presumed spirit, and, indeed, a central manifestation of that spirit? In the same way, the novel was once considered to have been *the* art of the bourgeois era, both for its social investigation and for its construction as narrative: the organization of experience as sequential tale, that is, of life as one or another kind of progression. Yet, even in its golden, or Balzacian, phase, the novel, *as art*, was never so much a reflection of society and the age as it was their counter force and augmentation, novelistic image and idea establishing a life and epoch of their own.

In other words, the novel, like any art, occupies what we might call aesthetic time and not, except as a matter of mere chronology, the time of history, the time of the immediate and ongoing life of society—as society. Aesthetic time is peculiarly and properly out of joint with the age, which produces it disconsolately and with great suspicion, like any totalitarianism in whose midst an alternative persists. This alternative is ruled by chronometers of no practical application, and it occupies a dimension characterized by a crucial kind of inactuality. Aesthetic time, like religious time, is a mode of inhabiting the non-historic and non-contingent, an abode for ways of being that are *unlike the present*. As such, art—as Pablo Picasso once remarked—is the lie that leads to truth (Ashton, 21).

Religious time, like religion itself, was nearly spent by the late 1960s, but aesthetic time was merely unfashionable. It was not present in consciousness to anything like the extent it had been in periods when art presumably existed for some “sake” other than the utilitarian, the uses of art having undergone a severe pressure toward the actual, by which I mean chiefly the social and the political. The notion of art as something virtual slipped away, and any conception of aesthetic reality, especially that of fiction and film, as a “lie” in Picasso’s sense carried in many quarters a taint of something close to treason. (Think here only of the “nonfiction novel” as it was invented and practiced by Norman Mailer, Tom Wolfe, and Truman Capote; and think especially of the “truth” of Capote’s book *In Cold Blood* [1965], quickly turned into the faithful film *In Cold Blood* [1967], which itself resurfaced in the recent bio-pic *Capote* [2005].) To be sure, there was a large irony in the fact that film had come to play so central a role in the progressive abandonment of the notion that art is a strategic lie and in the rise of a corollary idea—that art can give us the truth directly by its capacity to ensnare and overcome the palpable present through a sort of magical rite; that it can, as it were, capture the “enemy” by capturing the enemy’s own image.

Indeed, the long struggle on the part of the cinema to be accepted as an art began with its having to get *past* the belief that it was merely reproductive

or imitative, a matter of mirrors and not of new perception. The French New Wave, for example (despite the imprecision of such a designation and the fact that its individual instances were far from constituting a practice in absolute coherence with a body of theory), itself had been moving toward the specificity and eventfulness of the actual world. Yet, the point ought to be made that the best of this movement's films were still most importantly "truthful," not because they were "true to life," but because they were true to *aesthetic* notions—no matter how radically these notions may have departed from sanctified definitions and criteria, as they did in the work of an innovator like Godard.

French New Wave films like Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959), François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960), and Godard's *Weekend* (1967) may have been truer than immediately preceding styles to what we might call the facts, the actualities of our political and social existence in the historical present. But, if so, their "truth" was the result not of ever having made the capturing and rendering of such actualities a *raison d'être*, an end in itself, but of a movement of artistic renewal that begins with a repudiation of the inorganic artifices and sterilities of a medium which had been feeding off itself. The new postwar movements in cinema, predominantly the work of Italian as well as French directors, came into being precisely when film art was felt to have become unfaithful to both imagination *and* reality, such that film art had to free itself—as art through the ages has recurrently had to do—of the forms that previous artists had originated for the disposition of what had been new reality in *their* time. (It is worth adding that only the narrowest and most preliminary form of freedom or liberation was bestowed at the time by such socially realistic British films as *Room at the Top* [1959], *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* [1960], and *A Taste of Honey* [1961], with their temperamental and thematic rebelliousness but mostly traditional cinematic procedures.)

Almost seventy years ago, even before the French New Wave, Italian neorealists such as Vittorio De Sica, Roberto Rossellini, Luchino Visconti, and Federico Fellini revolted against the sterile conventions of Fascist bourgeois cinema. But they were soon followed by Michelangelo Antonioni, who grew up artistically with the necessary wish to dynamite the neorealists' own petrifying ideas of what constituted reality—and who proceeded to do so from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s. Antonioni may have remained a realist throughout his career, but his style could be described as accession through reduction, the coming into truer forms, hence truer knowledge of our own existential alienation, through the cutting away of created encumbrances: all the replicas we have made of ourselves; all the misleading, because logical or only psychological, narratives; the whole apparatus of reflected wisdom, inherited emotions, received ideas, and reiterated clichés. In this way, Antonioni was re-shaping not only the idea of the content of film drama, he was also re-shaping time itself in his films: daring to ask his audience to "live through" experiences with less distillation than they were accustomed

to; and deriving his drama from the very texture of such experiences and their juxtaposition, rather than from formal clash, climax, and resolution.

Unlike Antonioni, the Spaniard Luis Buñuel did not remain a realist throughout his long career—which began in the late 1920s and continued until the mid-1970s—if one could say he was ever the complete realist in any of his films. “Visionary,” perhaps the most exhausted word in the critical vocabulary, struggles back to life when applied to Buñuel and his anti-bourgeois, anti-Catholic camera. In the consistent clarity of its perception, in its refusal to distinguish between something called “reality” and something called “hallucination,” in its desire to retain narrative while simultaneously calling into question the illusionist tyranny of narrative, Buñuel’s camera always acts in the service of a fundamental surrealist principle—one of the few principles of any kind that this director was never tempted to call into question.

Whether focused on the tragic earthly destiny of an inept would-be saint (*Nazarín* [1959]) or on the bizarre obsessions of an inept would-be sinner (the uncle in *Viridiana* [1961]); whether filming the slitting of an eyeball (*An Andalusian Dog* [1929]) or the ragings of a necrophiliac (*Wuthering Heights* [1954]); whether envisioning slabs of raw meat hanging from the racks of a Mexico City streetcar (*Illusion Travels by Streetcar* [1954]) or the incongruous verticality of the skeletal skyscrapers rising from the Mexico City slums (*Los olvidados* [1950]); whether portraying an old man who is shoe fetishist (*Diary of a Chambermaid* [1964]) or a respectable bourgeois wife who works as a sadomasochistic prostitute in the afternoons (*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* [1972]), Buñuel’s camera is the instrument of the most rigorous denotation, invoking nothing beyond that which it so plainly and patently registers, demonstrating more clearly than any other that surrealist perspectives demand cinematographic realism as their means of transmission. The uncertainties and ambivalences we may feel as we see the extremes of human experience depicted in a Buñuel film, therefore, arise not from the camera’s capacity to mediate but from the camera’s capacity to record.

By the late 1960s, the influence in America of the cinema of Buñuel and Antonioni—indeed, of the entire European regeneration in filmmaking—had been so assimilated or, more accurately, appropriated, that we were already on the high wave of something we can speak of today as a new, post-Hollywood cinematic morale and manner, though by no means of an independent and assured style. This morale and manner meant that the world, hidden for so long behind fantasy and illusion, as though by a conspiracy to keep us from *knowing*, came flooding onto the screen, carrying with it every verisimilitudinous gesture, face, and act, all languages or vocabularies of currency, and the seemingly authentic brutalities, pathologies, and pornographies (as well as the stances that had been adopted against them) of the age and even of the moment. *The Graduate* (1967) and *Bonnie and Clyde*, two movies whose importance was of a rather different

kind from what their admirers claimed, mark this point in post-Hollywood, when American film began to take up in earnest the burden and question of America as a society: its self-consciousness and self-division, the very face and movement of its historical present, the weight and ache of its momentous past.

These and other films, which seemed to come to us from such different starting points and in so changed a light from the Hollywood of the immediate past, were the products of a complex background. That they were being made in such numbers is, of course, in large degree a technical and economic matter, as well as a sociological one, and that they were being made for the most part by a new breed of film person is another (related) matter. What everyone noticed first in looking out on this scene was the youth of so many of those who composed it—the youth of the new American filmmakers and of their films' entrepreneurs, performers, and hangers-on—the youth, especially, of their audiences. Like the new music of the time, film was a young man's game, and, like music, it was a game played in significant part out of a profound indifference, rather than a violent hostility, to the prevailing middle-class culture and values. But it was also played out of a desire to impose upon society a truthfulness—of event, emotion, and action—which the society had until this point masked from itself (and nowhere more pervasively than in films) through fantasy and illusion, wishful thinking and *ersatz*, compensatory fictions.

This "game" was *not* played out of a desire to impose on the world impressive monuments of sensibility—discrete and self-authorizing artifacts of imagination in the tradition of the masterpieces by which we have judged the progress and importance of art for the past several hundred years. The new films participated in, and were exemplary and influential expressions of, that new spirit of political and cultural insubordination, that amateur and informal (anti-formal in some of its manifestations) call to order by which it was hoped that the frozen values and procedures of the dominant bourgeois society—forever faithful to sanctified forms and thus forever reproducing them—would be not so much overthrown as displaced. These films for the most part took themselves seriously only in the sense that they were serving something more serious than themselves, and what I mean by this is not art, not any transcendent or visionary mode of creation, but life itself—life re-consecrated and wholly consigned to the present.

This is an exceedingly human desire, but it is characterized by a naïveté that determined the inferiority (for all its superiority to its own recent past) of the new American cinema compared to its European counterpart. To try to appropriate the truths of the world through an exclusive *élan* about what is palpably happening in society, to try to make "where it's at" (in Bob Dylan's words) the basis of your vision, is to trust that the world will yield up its pleasures and secrets in the face of sincerity, or what I prefer to call *mere* sincerity. The tradition of art has never relied on that, which is why the search for new forms has always had to go on. Within that



tradition at the time, filmmakers like Antonioni, Fellini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini; Truffaut, Resnais, and Godard; Carl Theodor Dreyer, Robert Bresson, and Yasujiro Ozu; Ingmar Bergman, Jacques Rivette, and Buñuel—all of these writer-directors worked, to be sure, at the renewed obligation to take account of the present, to be accurate and thoroughgoing in using the insistent materials of the here-and-now. They may even have wanted strenuously to change things. But they did not work by ceding their transformative vision to the public atmosphere, and they did not offer us portraits of how it is or “where it’s at.”

Of this group, Godard’s films were even more directly about life and art, imagination and the actual. For this reason he can be said to have been a more contemporary or radically advanced artist than any of these European or Asian directors, although he is not necessarily a greater one. But Godard made an even more explicit ground for his work in the struggle against the use of film as sheer illusion or story, and in an investigation of the pressures of actuality upon consciousness. The source of his influence, unequalled at the time among young filmmakers both in the United States and other countries, was preeminently his having taken up with brilliant force and diversity the question of what film, that opening onto nearly everything there is (including eternity), can and ought to do with its powers.

Godard’s films consistently tested the relationship between fiction and reality, for example, by rejecting narrative in favor of *praxis*, or the working out of social and political theory within the context of the cinematic process itself. To this end, his films became increasingly dialectical and rhetorical in structure starting in the early 1960s, and Godard himself called them “critical essays.” *Les Carabiniers* (1963), one of his first important works, was less a war movie than a series of propositions about war in the form of a fable, a parody, and a faux-documentary. A film of sociological inquiry, *Masculine/Feminine* (1965) itself was concerned not with its slender plot, but instead with illustrating fifteen distinct problems of the younger generation, “the children of Marx and Coca-Cola,” members of which are interviewed and interview one another in *cinéma-vérité* fashion. Recalling Godard’s own *My Life to Live* (1962) and *A Married Woman* (1964) but an even more radical indictment of capitalist technocracy than these two pictures, *Two or Three Things I Know about Her* (1966) was a collage of images and interviews centering around a Parisian housewife who has turned to casual prostitution in order to keep herself in bourgeois luxury. And *Pierrot le fou* (1965), ostensibly modeled on the American B-film gangster thriller like Godard’s earlier *Breathless* (1960), came close, in its disjointed and self-reflexive narrative style, to realizing his idea of a film without writing, editing, or sound-mixing. (The idea for *Pierrot le fou*, incidentally, almost certainly came from the script for *Bonnie and Clyde*, which was first offered to Truffaut to direct and then passed on to Godard.)

Godard's enormous technical virtuosity in these films, breaking rules and establishing precedents as it exhibited itself, was, of course, no hermetic series of mere feats, no skill practiced in the void, but a function—occluded and less than clarifying sometimes, it is true—of his profound and active meditation on the uses of film as consciousness. His technical vocabulary—the result of his refashioning the formal tools of naturalism—was widely adopted, but it was not the basis of Godard's most important effect on those he inspired or stimulated. What was chiefly seized became less a technical matter than one of morale, of a method of approach or procedure to the making of movies. In the possible rationales he demonstrated for the making of films; in his having addressed himself with such protean energy to the matter of the filmmaker's responsibility in political and social realms; in his attempt to articulate a freely changing aesthetic that would at the same time illuminate a mode of being or behaving in the world, Godard more than any other man changed the face of the screen during this period.

But American filmmaking that was influenced by him is mostly Godard minus Godard's embattled sense of the actual and potential misuses of film. For in granting a new *élan* to cinema, a new ethos for creating it, he simultaneously put under interdiction, in a far more revolutionary way than Antonioni, its chief traditional concerns and intentions: to tell complete, well-made, consistent stories, to make the world seem more coherent than it is, to replace ordinary sight with ideal or compensatory vision. Godard's quarrel with popular cinema—even, or perhaps especially, popular “arty” cinema—was analogous to Bertolt Brecht's with popular theater: they are “culinary,” made to be consumed, designed to satisfy; above all, designed to leave intact the sensibility and thought—and thus the world—that are brought to them. In fending off this culinary impulse on the part of audiences so sophisticated that they devoured the avant-garde the way their fathers did the retrograde, Godard was compelled to change radically his procedures with nearly every new film, so as to shake his admirers loose from their belief that they “had” him or had him figured out.

As much in the areas where Godard's influence had been paramount as in those where it had not, the New American Cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s was still very much in the culinary stage. It was a new kind of diet, certainly—far more sophisticated, tougher, more suited to people's constitutions during this period. But it went down too easily, being almost wholly and instantly digestible. To be sure, what was being consumed was no longer debilitating fantasy; it was an ostensible portrait of the world. Yet, in the very attempt to gain control over that world through realistic portrayal—through a refusal to allow it to be hidden or veiled in any detail—these new films shook no consciousness or sensibility. Instead, they reinforced what we were already conscious and sensible of, what was there waiting to be consumed in one more homogenized form.

They did this in the first place by their lack of aesthetic, as opposed to thematic or technical, daring, by their continuing to present not new relationships between consciousness and reality but “novel” stories. Structurally speaking, almost all of these movies were traditional narratives, relying on incidents moving in an inexorable line to an unsurprising conclusion; relying, too, on certain wishes and expectations on the part of the audience—in sum a trust, which is not betrayed, that the story will come out right. Which is not to say necessarily happily; in this sophisticated epoch, unhappy endings that confirmed our previously-arrived-at unhappy conclusions about the state of society were more than acceptable. In this way, a film like *Medium Cool* was certain to have its protagonists die as a more or less direct result of the evil, in the form of a brutal police-action, unleashed at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968; while *Easy Rider* would have its heroes killed down South as the inevitable outcome of American prejudice and bigotry toward “difference,” otherness, or dissent.

That these films were sequential narratives—a tale of American outlaw violence in *Bonnie and Clyde* or *The Wild Bunch*, of American youth’s disaffection and dropping out in *The Graduate*, of sexual appetite and pathology in *Coming Apart* or political pathology in *Medium Cool*—is not what’s crucial. What is, though, is that they were narratives *without impediment*, without counterforces to the tendency of film (as of the novel) to serve as a solacer, in that subtle way by which comfort is likely to come whenever we see experience presented as consecutive and orderly, shapely and coherent, with a beginning, middle, and end and the possibility of moral or ethical extrapolation. Thus to give us, in anecdotal form, a summary or description of what we had already experienced—this was the chief failure and insufficiency of the New American Cinema of contemporary acumen and worldly consciousness.

The irony here is that the world was not seen anew, with Brechtian distance, or even with renewed attentiveness, but reflected instead through the clouds composing the *Zeitgeist*, the public atmosphere of the moment. These raids on currency, exploitations all of what the moment held up as seductive, were functions, to begin with, of economic plausibility; they were what would sell to the new young audiences for film, as romantic fantasy or pseudo-sophisticated, pillow-talk comedy no longer could. But on a much deeper level such “raids on currency” were functions of the inability of American filmmaking thus far to take hold of the lessons Godard and others had taught about actuality and the imagination, the nature of invention, and the artistic necessity of simultaneously adding to and subtracting from reality rather than simply trying to reflect it.

Audiences themselves were seduced by a giddy sense of contemporaneity: by pretensions to the nitty-gritty, by modish sorts of “honesty,” or by *frissons* arising from the breaking of taboos. *Midnight Cowboy*, for one, employed a troupe of real Andy Warhol cohorts for no organic reason, simply as a titillating presence from

the place “where it’s at.” *Putney Swope*, a festival of chic clichés—about blacks, whites, politics, sex, Jews, advertising, and materialism—also offered a glossary of current, down-to-earth utterance, such as “schmuck,” “dry hump,” “bullshit,” even “mother-fucker.” *Coming Apart*, for its part, pretending to psychological verisimilitude, exhibited “far-out” sexual activities with an air of announcing that it was *the first* to show them. And that, I think, goes to the heart of this strange condition of a sophistication that was at the same time a profound naïveté.

The enthusiastic audience of *Putney Swope*, for instance—made up mostly of very young persons (myself one of them back in those days)—was responding in great part to what it had not yet heard or seen *out in the light*: to an experience, that is to say, of a crude, initiatory kind, full of emblems and icons of public awareness and of an eventfulness previously passed through in private, whether in actuality or supposition. And this eventfulness bristled with the sense of a social reality whose conquest by mimicry assuaged the audience’s terrors and overcame for the moment its impotence. This is how I think that film in large part was being used at this time in America, the capacity of the screen to substitute for the world thereby bringing about a kind of treacherously false education and false regeneration—a feeling of conquest grounded on a mistaking of the mesmerizing images or coerced reflections of the world and society for the truth about them.

Yet, in art it is not life itself that makes the context—it is the objects of art themselves. This means that to accomplish a great work one must not merely observe life; such an effort alone is insufficient and even artificial. We observe life as we live it. To say that in order to create a person just has to observe society or the world is simply wrong, for society and the world are always there in our experiences. Now no one would claim that the then fashionable and aspiring American filmmakers were ambitious to create their own great works. They were not even interested, as I have pointed out, in creating “artworks” at all. But the truth of the above idea about aesthetic context applies to them willy-nilly. In the matter of making imaginary things, even in the making of such “impure” objects as films, the context should not have been life and the observation should not have been of society, the world, the here-and-now. We had already obtained these materials, these realities or truths, on our own. The point was, and remains, to subject them to the lie that resurrects and, in the deepest sense we have known so far, authenticates such factual materials at the same time as it transfigures them.

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#### FILMOGRAPHY OF 50 REPRESENTATIVE NEW AMERICAN FILMS

- The Pawnbroker* (1965), directed by Sidney Lumet
- Mickey One* (1965), directed by Arthur Penn
- Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), directed by Mike Nichols
- David Holzman's Diary* (1967), directed by Jim McBride
- Up the Down Staircase* (1967), directed by Robert Mulligan
- Who's That Knocking at My Door* (1967), directed by Martin Scorsese
- Cool Hand Luke* (1967), directed by Stuart Rosenberg
- Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), directed by Arthur Penn
- The Graduate* (1967), directed by Mike Nichols
- In Cold Blood* (1967), directed by Richard Brooks
- Greetings* (1968), directed by Brian De Palma
- Head* (1968), directed by Bob Rafelson
- Faces* (1968), directed by John Cassavetes
- 2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), directed by Stanley Kubrick
- Midnight Cowboy* (1969), directed by John Schlesinger
- Easy Rider* (1969), directed by Dennis Hopper
- Goodbye, Columbus* (1969), directed by Larry Peerce
- Medium Cool* (1969), directed by Haskell Wexler
- Coming Apart* (1969), directed by Milton Moses Ginsberg
- Alice's Restaurant* (1969), directed by Arthur Penn
- Putney Swope* (1969), directed by Robert Downey, Sr.
- Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* (1969), directed by Paul Mazursky
- The Wild Bunch* (1969), directed by Sam Peckinpah

*Last Summer* (1969), directed by Frank Perry  
*The Learning Tree* (1969), directed by Gordon Parks  
*The Rain People* (1969), directed by Francis Ford Coppola  
*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), directed by Sydney Pollack  
*Little Big Man* (1970), directed by Arthur Penn  
*M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), directed by Robert Altman  
*The Strawberry Statement* (1970), directed by Stuart Hagmann  
*Joe* (1970), directed by John G. Avildsen  
*Getting Straight* (1970), directed by Richard Rush  
*Five Easy Pieces* (1970), directed by Bob Rafelson  
*Catch-22* (1970), directed by Mike Nichols  
*Drive, He Said* (1971), directed by Jack Nicholson  
*Carnal Knowledge* (1971), directed by Mike Nichols  
*McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971), directed by Robert Altman  
*Two-Lane Blacktop* (1971), directed by Monte Hellman  
*The Last Picture Show* (1971), directed by Peter Bogdanovich  
*The French Connection* (1971), directed by William Friedkin  
*Fat City* (1972), directed by John Huston  
*Slaughterhouse-Five* (1972), directed by George Roy Hill  
*The King of Marvin Gardens* (1972), directed by Bob Rafelson  
*Badlands* (1973), directed by Terrence Malick  
*The Last Detail* (1973), directed by Hal Ashby  
*Mean Streets* (1973), directed by Martin Scorsese  
*The Friends of Eddie Coyle* (1973), directed by Peter Yates  
*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), directed by Martin Scorsese  
*Chinatown* (1974), directed by Roman Polanski  
*The Conversation* (1974), directed by Francis Ford Coppola





## PART II, 1970-2010

### Károly Makk's *Love*

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Károly Makk (born 1925) had to wait five years before he could make *Love* (1970), one of the most moving commentaries on life under political tyranny that has ever been filmed. The tyrant concerned was Mátyás Rákosi (1892-1971), one of the last of the Russian puppets who ruled Hungary with an iron hand and made political opponents disappear. *Love* is set in 1953—three years before the Hungarian Uprising of 1956—when Hungary was under a totalitarian rule during which thousands of Rákosi's real and imagined foes were killed or arrested. This film could only be made after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which also marked a turning point, at least in terms of cultural policy, in Hungary.

Makk's *Love* is about love (and won the Cannes Special Jury Prize in 1971), and concerns a dying old woman in Budapest whose son is in prison for political activity, although she believes he is in the United States; about the daughter-in-law who forges letters from the son describing his glorious American career as a film director, so that the old lady (who has already lost another son, to war) can die happy; and about the son, who is released from prison unexpectedly but too late to see his mother. When you have heard those admittedly unimpressive facts, you know as little as I did when I first heard them. Yet, this is a film of depth and delicacy—small-scale but true. Basically it is a political film: at least it is about the stubbornness of individual feeling, more than individual thought, in a society not designed for wide variations in either. And it is also about how living in such a society affects the feelings: fidelity, faith or illusion, love.

The director, Makk, is famous at home and still working (his last feature was released in 2010), but he is still virtually unknown abroad. The script was adapted by Péter Bacsó (1928-2009) and Tibor Déry (1896-1977) from two of the latter's own autobiographical stories ("Szerellem" ["Love," 1956] and "Két asszony" ["Two Women," 1962]); the photography is by a wizard of black-and-white named János

Tóth (born 1930), and the light-fingered editor is György Sívó. Together, they have all focused sympathy and art on this slender story to make it not only moving but microcosmic. *Love* deals specifically with Hungary but has an absolutely universal appeal; a good deal about a great deal is encompassed in this little film. It begins with some flashes of the old lady in her bedroom, rising from her bed, going slowly to her window, all this latticed with old photographs and details of her life, accompanied by a faint tinkle like the memory of a music box. Thus before the picture is two minutes old, you know you are in the hands of discriminating artists who are going to tell you a story of pathos without being pathetic. Indeed, the very gentleness of the lyrical, imaginative editing has a hard edge of selectivity about it, of restraint.

*Love* revolves around the daughter-in-law's ironclad reality and the mother's ephemeral present, which is infiltrated by slivers of memory from her long-ago past. Memories (of something as ordinary as a briefly glimpsed bench), fantasies (of six men riding on horseback through a forest, for example, or of movie-made America), and even dream sequences (in one, the old lady dreams of her son's life in a French castle on the highest mountain in New York) invade the old woman's bedroom during a cold, wet spring and merge with the room's everyday objects (a clock ticking, a piece of fruit on a table). The film's method of blending past and present is to use flashbacks or first-person "narration," a popular technique throughout the Eastern Bloc in the 1970s. For flashbacks demystify collective memory by means of *individual* memory, and introduce subjectivity as a counter to the monological narrative of the Party-State.

Throughout the film, the viewer is thus placed in a position that alters between the external and internal, the real and imagined. As the camera observes the old woman from afar, for example, the sense of confinement and stillness is heightened, trapped as she is behind windows and lying dormant in bed. When this inactivity is punctured by the images she conjures up, however, we see a woman brought magically to life, her mind exploding onto the screen. The camera flits seamlessly between making us look at her and through her, so that the divides between inner and outer, fiction and reality, eventually break down and a kind of dreamlike, timeless quality is created. In this way the film's rhythm also creates feelings of uncertainty and unpredictability from one scene to the next—as in "Where are we?", "Why are we here?", and "How much time, if any, has passed: a week, a month, . . .?"

Indeed, apart from the use of terms such as *kitelepítés* (forced relocation, usually from cities to the countryside) and *társbérlok* (co-tenants), which place the film in the early 1950s, one cannot say for certain that *Love* is not a contemporaneous document of Hungary in the late 1960s or early 1970s. The trauma suffered by the characters could easily have taken place at any point in

the interwar years. In any event, Makk and his editor's deliberate transpositions of past and present themselves undermine any attempts to tie the film to a specific point in time.

Feelings of temporal uncertainty, of course, are precisely the ones felt by the elderly woman's son: one day he was at home, the next day he was a political prisoner and his wife did not know whether he was still alive; for some years he was imprisoned, and then, one day, some Communist functionary decided to set him free. We never find out why the son was arrested, and the sole government officials we see are those overseeing his release (and possibly two men who claim to be from the telephone company). The son's incarceration seems to require explanation, for it was highly unlikely that such an individual would have committed a serious crime. Yet, it is precisely the mystery, or the pointlessness, of the prison sentence that constitutes one of the major—and unresolved—narratives of the film: the reason for the son's imprisonment, or his release, is simply not explained, either to him or to the viewer. In the taxi on his way home, the driver asks, "*Politikai?*"—a question that the now gray, middle-aged son need not, or cannot, answer. This is all deliberate, of course, partly because *Love* was still filmed under the auspices of a Communist government (albeit one that had moved on from the terror of the Rákosi regime), partly because Makk obviously wishes to concentrate on the personal aspect: on how living under these political conditions affects the everyday lives of ordinary people.

As for the forged letters themselves, they help the film to raise the question not only of the fictions we create in our own minds, but also those that we create for others. These letters are very elaborate, written in such detail that even the elderly woman's devoted maid, Irén, claims they are beyond the realm of probability. So why doesn't this mother suspect that all is not as it seems to be? The daughter-in-law tells the maid that the old lady is "deaf and blind" when it comes to matters concerning her son. Such is her love for him that she will believe any news of his supposed success. However, there is another interpretation: that she wants to believe the content of the letters and gives the impression of believing it wholesale, but that she has some idea of the truth. For example, at one point when she is reading one of the letters, Makk intersperses her words (heard out loud as well as in the form of mumblings or mutterings in the background), thoughts, and imaginings—the life of her mind, as it were—with flashes of the prison cell where we later see her son imprisoned. Should we therefore believe that the inclusion of these shots suggests that this man's mother suspects what really happened to him, and that she is intentionally deluding herself as to the picture her daughter-in-law paints of his success abroad?



**44. *Love* (1970), dir. Károly Makk**

The daughter-in-law, Luca, is played by Mari Törőcsik (born 1935), a fine actress of charm and wit, young at the time but with long experience on stage and screen. Luca comes regularly to visit her bedridden mother-in-law, with flowers, and between the two there is a fabric of real affection, nicely and credibly tempered with impatience and jealousy on both sides. The old lady admires Luca's beauty and steadfastness but admires them less in themselves than as proof that her son chose well. Luca, very bright, knows this; likes it and resents it; and teases the old woman, who is Austrian by birth and apparently has a German accent in Hungarian.

Bedridden, always feeble, Lili Darvas (1906-74) nevertheless creates, in the old woman, an entire woman: tender, domineering, cultivated, silly, perceptive, and frightened of dying without her son at her side. Miss Darvas made her début in Budapest as Juliet in 1921, and in the late 1920s was engaged by Max Reinhardt to learn German and join his company. She was thus a bilingual leading actress in the years before the Second World War, playing in the German-speaking theater and occasionally going back to Budapest. Among her other roles, for many years she did a new play written for her every year by her husband, Ferenc Molnár (1878-1952). She came to America when Hitler came to Vienna, and her career from that point on was not what it would have been otherwise. But at least we have this film.

Through Luca's visits to her mother-in-law, the little duels and meals shared and expenses deplored, we get much of the past of both, pivoted on the son—the person missing from each of their lives. The fact of his absence, which is omnipresent, Luca's deception of the old woman so that she can die proud (and so that she does not die from shock at the revelation of her son's arrest), our knowledge

of the political climate they all inhabit and that the son is a kind of hero—all these give the film an overall atmosphere of freighted quiet. There is more not heard in the picture than heard. Still, the old woman and the young one love and tease each other; and, sprinkled through in quicksilver flashes, we get the world of the old lady's youth—elegance and happy marriage and savor.



**45. *Love* (1970), dir. Károly Makk**

Luca loses her teaching job because of her husband's politics and her friends desert her. She has to take lodgers in her small apartment, and she moves into a back room. She keeps up appearances for her mother-in-law with the maid's help. Then the old lady breaks her leg, develops pneumonia, and, after a last quasi-flirtation with a young doctor fond of music, she dies. (Something, which, in the vein of this reticent film, we do not actually see.) And then, suddenly, the state releases the son.

This, clearly, is the second of the two Déry stories that are the source of the script. Far from letting the seam show, Makk makes the most of the transition—to this central character whom we have not yet seen. At the end of the last “mother” sequence, the screen goes black. Then dots of light break the blackness as the grill on the son's cell door is opened. His name is János, and he is in the film for only the last fifteen or twenty minutes; what insures the picture against faltering is that he is played by Iván Darvas (1925-2007; no relation to Lili).

Mr. Darvas had made many films before and made many afterwards. (His theater triumphs included *Hamlet* and *My Fair Lady*.) He is an actor of very easy richness, and he fills this small but crucial role with every tonality you have been



led to expect in the son. As he makes his way from his cell to the prison office to his home, he creates a man relieved but not free, glad but within limits, hopeful because—perhaps *only* because—he is alive. During the prisoner’s journey home, for instance, this actor expresses perfectly not just the joy of freedom but the fear of finding that those he loves have forgotten him, or have somehow freed themselves from him. Luca did not expect him and is not home. So you know there is going to be a scene where she walks in and finds him, and in a way you dread this moment.



**46. *Love* (1970), dir. Károly Makk**

Will it spoil the film, with emotion too glibly tapped? The answer, resoundingly, is no. She comes into the kitchen and sees him—the husband who has been in prison for a year and whom she expected to be there for another nine years—sitting quietly by the stove, eating a large slice of bread and butter. The camera holds on her alone; and in that moment, this lovely girl grows old. Everything that she had fought off during the past year catches up with her as she looks at him. There are a few flashes of their embrace before they embrace, and in fear of that embrace, she turns aside. Then he comes to her, and the film ends as it began: quietly, in love. (That their love binds them together and sustains their marriage, we may assume, given the fact that Makk directed a sequel of sorts in 2003, titled *A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda*, and starring both Mari Töröcsik and Iván Darvas.)

Let me add, about love of the kind found in *Love*, that in this case the treatment of this emotion happily avoids the excesses of sentimentality, on the one hand, and irony, on the other. Naturally the cinema, like literature, has always taken profound emotion as one of its primary subjects; and being moved, in art as in life, may be the oldest emotion of them all. But great filmmakers like Károly

Makk, like great writers, make it new every time. They do so with unembarrassed earnestness, a willingness to consider the world seriously and uncorrosively, without any interest in cynicism or nihilism, alienation or revolt, the hip or the cool. All of which, like irony, are really the flip side of sentimentality, that sweet instrument of evasion and shield, whose strong and touching feeling the lesser artist uses to deflect strong and heartless pain.

Indeed, if the seven deadly sins were reconsidered for the post modern age, vanity would be replaced by sentimentality. The most naked of all emotions, relegated to Hallmark cards and embroidered pillows, sentimentality is one of the distinctive elements of kitsch. “The heart surges”—could there be a better description of a person in the throes of sentiment, whose heart expands to absorb its impact? But, as with other sins of excess, the line here between the permissible and the scandalous resists easy definition. As Somerset Maugham put the matter, “Sentimentality is only sentiment that rubs you the wrong way” (entry 1941). And Maugham doubtless knew that, with the exception of puppy dogs or little children, love is the most sentimental of subjects, and sentimentality is the pitfall that all great love stories must overcome.

*Love* may not be a love story in the traditional sense, but it is a love story nonetheless. However, unlike great sentimental characters such as Jay Gatsby and Emma Bovary—who, by novel’s end, must somehow be disabused of that emotion, unsentimentalized, just before death (the reverse of the process undergone by Lily Bart in Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* [1905])—János’s mother, for all her filial feeling, seems disabused of sentimentality almost from the start. That is because, as an indigenous member of a lower social order than the titular characters of Fitzgerald and Flaubert, she cannot afford it, in both senses of the word.

János’s mother has no “title” like “Great” or “Madame”; hers could only be the generic, anonymous, unadorned one of mother, if she were part of her film’s title in the first place. But she is not. And neither is her son. And thus are we quietly informed that it is to the emotion of love, not to herself, that she—and he—would be devoted. Which is sentiment that rubs me the right way.

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## Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Lola*

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Perhaps in ironic reference to the sentimental, idyllic postwar genre of the *Heimatfilm* (homeland film), Rainer Werner Fassbinder once said, famously, that he was trying to construct a house with his films, which is hard, enervating, and even dangerous work. Many filmmakers have left their own houses half-finished. But, with the possible exception of, say, Yasujiro Ozu, Fassbinder was the only one who left a beautiful, livable dwelling into which others might enter and be inspired to build their own. Had he lived, he would surely have made modifications and built many extensions, but the fact that he left us with a finished product is fairly astonishing given the short time he had to complete it. Not every part of the house is equally interesting: Think of *Satan's Brew* (1976) as the plumbing and *Chinese Roulette* (1976) as the wiring. The three films that comprise the famous FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) trilogy, as it came to be known, are the rock-solid foundation—or, perhaps, the central staircase: *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979), *Veronika Voss* (1982), and *Lola* (1981).

Unlike most of the other houses going up around him at the time, built with flimsy modern foundations that did not go deep enough (for fear of hitting the rotten substratum of Nazism), Fassbinder's house was built with a sense of history. Of his generation, Fassbinder was the only director whose interest in German film history neglected neither the period of the Third Reich nor the much-disparaged 1950s. He had no fear of contact when he was giving parts to such actors as Luise Ullrich, Werner Finck, Adrian Hoven, and Barbara Valentin, whereas most of New German Cinema was busy relegating former stars to the background and making its farewell to "Papa's cinema."

Fassbinder understood that as a German in the 1970s, one had to do real historical excavation to recreate not just the images but the mental framework of the past, not merely to acknowledge historical amnesia, but to make an effort to understand how and why it manifested itself. Fassbinder once said of the traumatized German reaction to the American television miniseries,

When I see the fuss being made over *Holocaust*, I wonder why they have to make such a fuss; have they really repressed and forgotten all of that? They can't have forgotten it; they must have had it on their minds when they were creating their new state. If a thing of so much significance could be forgotten or repressed, then something must be pretty wrong with this democracy and this new "German model." (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 38).

He knew, you see, that all roads led back to the gray, amoral confusion of the 1950s and the years of the *Wirtschaftswunder*—Germany's postwar economic miracle.

Fassbinder realized that he had to build his house quickly if it was going to have any meaning, which means that he did something almost impossible: He acted at the speed of his emotions and thoughts. He wanted and got a direct correlation between living and fiction-making. This is almost impossible in film production, where there's a lot of atrophy-inducing waiting time because of the effort, money, needed manpower, tactical and strategic difficulties, endurance tests, and care required to get a presentable image. It's no wonder, then, that he resorted to cocaine and an assortment of other drugs. Indeed, it would have been shocking if he *had not* done so.

Fassbinder's nonstop work ethic also allowed him to break through the removed, God's-eye view that comes all too often with the territory of modern cinema. He's always *right there* with his characters, in time, space, and spirit. "Should you sit around waiting until something's become a tradition," he once said, "or shouldn't you rather roll up your sleeves and get to work developing one?" (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 32). Too much time spent listening to the music of your own voice gives rise to a temptation to round everything off into a definitive statement; it gives you a sense of false confidence that you're delivering, from on high, the last word on human affairs. By building his house from the inside out, Fassbinder was essentially trying to create a whole body of German films that would stand politically and spiritually against the flood of hypocritical, unfelt cinema that had come before and that was sure to come after. He tried to bypass hazy generalities and windy formulations through sheer speed and determination, and largely succeeded. "There's a sense of process in Fassbinder, a feeling of the movie as it's being made" (389), said the American critic Manny Farber, an early champion. That sense of process, of the movie and the man behind it thinking and reacting as he went along, was there right to the end, even in the fancier and more vaunted later works like *Despair* (1978) and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980).

As a result, Fassbinder casts a long shadow. His admirers have followed his example of throwing the moral underpinning out from under their narratives, but with rare exceptions (Olivier Assayas and André Téchiné come to mind), they all lack something that Fassbinder had in abundance, and that more than counterbalanced the endless, discomfited bitching of his characters: a tender eye. Such tenderness was part of a fullness of vision, and of the way he simply *looked* at people, that had not been seen since the silent era. In a 1977 interview, Farber declared that, "If someone sits on a couch in a Fassbinder movie, it's the first time it's been sat on that way in movies, it seems to me, in a long time. It's a big person on a small couch who's uncomfortable. A woman standing in a doorway in a Fassbinder film—that's a great vision. Of someone who's uncomfortable and doesn't like it and emits a feeling of savagery. In ecstatic, hieratic lighting of the kind found in Fra Angelico" (390).

The plasticity of Fassbinder's images is almost unparalleled—in the sound era, only the work of Carl Theodor Dreyer, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Jean-Luc Godard, at its very best, has a similar force and beauty. But Fassbinder had something else, too: He was an inventor. He gave us a whole new point of view, devoid of sentimentality or even grace yet profoundly empathic. In Fassbinder, a magical world of purely human wonders is parceled out to us in the form of tales in which desperation, treachery, scheming, hypocrisy, and ignorance play no small part, and where desire plays a major supporting role but the will to power is sadly dominant. Contrary to the opinion of some, however—and it's an opinion that I myself used to hold—Fassbinder did not make cruel films. His dramatically blunt tales speak, with tremendous urgency, for the Maria Brauns, the Veronika Vosses, and the Lolas of this world. In one sense, then, the films are blunt instruments, but what's most important is that they give the lives of ordinary souls the care and attention they deserve. Fassbinder protected his characters from the infectious diseases of idealization and sentimentality; his filmic space is far from transcendental: There is no beyond, nor any ultimate reality. There is nothing but human relations, given an awesome intensity, elevation, and richness. No one enjoys a state of grace, but everyone is ennobled.

Like a number of other Fassbinder films, *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Lola* describe the unconscious, collective enactment of an essentially negative action, namely the suppression of national memory, through hyperdramatic heroines whose fates are intertwined with the imperatives of their awful historical moments. How did the historical moment of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, of the postwar German economic miracle, come into being? Free-market boosters like to believe that it began with the installation of Ludwig Erhard, the economics minister of postwar Germany. In June 1948, when the country was at its lowest moral and economic ebb, Erhard went on the air to make two momentous announcements. The almost worthless Reichsmark would hitherto be replaced by the Deutschemark, forty of which would be distributed to every German, followed by twenty more, and followed by debt conversions at the rate of ten to one. Erhard also took the unprecedented step of dropping the wage and price controls introduced by the Nazis, first on consumer goods and, six months later, on food—a move that even the Allies had not considered. It's likely that Germany's recovery would have gone forward no matter what measures had been taken, since the country had nowhere to go but up. Still, a reconstruction boom took place under Erhard, and he had a lot to do with it.

Fassbinder himself was wholly uninterested in the reasons behind the miracle and more interested in the less fashionable topic of how the “miracle” narrative came into being in the first place, as well as the level of amnesia required to make it stick. In *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, *Veronika Voss*, and *Lola*, Fassbinder saw parts



of an overall picture of the FRG that help to answer these questions, as well as to better explain this strange democratic construction—its hazards and dangers, as well as its benefits and sureties. Each of these films, of course, features a female character. “All sorts of things can be told better about women; men usually behave the way society expects them to,” explained Fassbinder in an interview (quoted by Töteberg in “Candy-Colored Amoral,” n.p.). His screenwriter Peter Märthesheimer elaborated: “As far as men are concerned, it is instructive that in *Lola*, from a purely dramaturgical point of view, it is not Lola who is the hero, but rather Mr. von Bohm. And what are we told about our hero? That he is a victim. So the secret hero is Lola after all” (quoted in Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The history of the FRG is told through female characters in the FRG trilogy, which did not start out as one. Originally, Fassbinder had not conceived of three works on the same theme, but now he inserted, in the opening credits under the title of *Lola*, the subtitle “BRD 3” (Bundesrepublik Deutschland 3, or FRG 3).

Where *The Marriage of Maria Braun* itself is dark and luxuriously shadowed (like a late-1940s Warner Brothers picture in glowing color) and *Veronika Voss*, in black and white, displayed the visual style of an American *film noir*, *Lola* has an aggressively bright palette of hot pinks and lurid reds mixed with light greens, lemon yellows, and pale blues, married to hard shadows and a relentless, impulsive physicality. (Fassbinder and his cinematographer, Xaver Schwarzenberger, watched Technicolor films from the 1950s to get the look that they wanted.) Former East German star Armin Mueller-Stahl (von Bohm) claimed that he and his costars were constantly entering into the “red zone” with their performances throughout the lightning-fast shoot, which took place in the spring of 1981. Fassbinder himself encouraged all the participants to dare to go to the extremes in their respective fields, to go to the limit in attempting to extend the scale of cinematographic aesthetics.

They were helped by the film’s music. Melodrama (hyperdrama, even as I have used it—or histrionic drama—may be a better term in this context) is literally drama with music. Josef von Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* (1930) had already musically illustrated the world of the bourgeoisie, with its traditional melodies whistled by Professor Rath in the morning, as contrasted with the honky-tonk of current popular songs (“Get out there, give ’em the old schmaltz,” advises the director, shooing Lola out onto the stage). “Classical or modern?” asks von Bohm of Mrs. Kummer in the Fassbinder version, when he learns that her daughter is a “singer.” In fact, the pop hits of the 1950s telling of wanderlust and lovers’ bliss make up Lola’s repertoire in the Villa Fink establishment: “Am Tag als der Regen kam” (“The Day the Rain Came”); “Plaisir d’Amour” (“The Pleasure of Love”); and, above all, Rudi Schuricke’s “Fishermen of Capri.”



#### 47. *Lola* (1981), dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*Lola*, ostensibly the third part of the FRG trilogy but chronologically the second, was shadowed by Dirk Bogarde's desire to make another film (after *Despair*) with the director he considered so chaotically brilliant. His idea was to film Heinrich Mann's novel *Professor Unrat*, which had provided the basis for von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel*. Fassbinder's producers even offered a settlement to the Mann estate as a precautionary measure (and perhaps to buy the added commercial cachet of a *Blue Angel* remake). The screenwriters Märthesheimer and Pea Fröhlich then turned the tables on Mann's hero by letting their hero, von Bohm, now a building commissioner, humiliate *himself*, first by making a public spectacle of his hatred of the amoral pimp and building magnate Schuckert, then by withdrawing into a state of nostalgic denial.

Fassbinder wanted to make a film about the 1950s, but the theme of the high school teacher as small-town tyrant, a figure from the era of Kaiser Wilhelm, simply did not fit into the period of the German economic miracle. The protagonist had to have something to do with the reconstruction of the country, so a building commissioner seemed to be the ideal profession. A big-time building contractor as his antagonist formed a logical constellation. And the whore fit in with the time, as a virtual representative of the 1950s, because—as Fassbinder explains in the press booklet—"the years from 1956 to 1960 were more or less the most amoral period that Germany ever experienced" (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.).

In Mann's novel, the high school teacher Professor Unrat falls into social isolation through his liaison with Rosa Fröhlich, a.k.a. the "artiste" Lola Lola; in Fassbinder's film, the building commissioner, with his moral principles, was an outsider (from East Germany) in the town, but he becomes one of their own

through his relationship with Lola. The story is no longer set in nineteenth-century imperial society, but instead in the 1950s. “Of course there was something like bigoted, hypocritical morals,” Fassbinder again explains in the press booklet. “But between the people there was an implicitly sanctioned amorality” (Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). Lola embodies it, as does Schuckert. The building contractor is the man of the hour: down-to-earth, unscrupulous, and free of inopportune class conceit, unlike his wife, who cultivates it.

Schuckert is not a one-dimensional negative character, however: He is a man of considerable charm, a kind of sympathetic pig. “At least in a period when it came to rebuilding the country,” said Fassbinder, “the kind of vitality that this man has to have . . . to be a construction entrepreneur is an admirable vitality” (quoted in Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The happy ending is disavowed, but so is the melodrama: In contrast to *The Blue Angel*, *Lola* does not end in tragedy or even pathos. To wit, even after their marriage, which integrates von Bohm once and for all into small-town society, Lola remains Schuckert’s own private whore. (When, toward the end, she is a guest of the Schuckerts and the marriage, as at the end of *The Marriage of Maria Braun*, is effected through a deal about which the man in question knows nothing, once again we hear in the background a radio broadcast from a world soccer championship, this time from 1958 [Germany versus Sweden].) As for the marriage itself, Lola is all in white as she bids farewell, gets into her red convertible—and meets with the building contractor. This is followed by a closing scene in which von Bohm and his co-worker take a walk in the woods, during which von Bohm’s assertion that he is happy does not sound convincing. Thus does the false happy ending get a different accent, for von Bohm seems to have willingly resigned himself to his fate and the fact that Lola is betraying him.

Lola herself may instructively be contrasted here with Maria Braun. “With me, the actual development always lags behind my consciousness,” states Maria Braun. In the end she has to recognize that her marriage was based on deception, and the film ends in catastrophe. Lola has no illusions: She will not make a mistake, “because the soul knows more than the mind,” she explains right at the beginning. In the Villa Fink she gains insight into the structures of small-town society, but she is excluded from it; she wants to be part of it, however, and the way to achieve that for a woman is still through marriage. Lola knows that her marriage is a deal with a third person, but that is no reason to shun marriage. On the contrary: She has defused an explosive through union with von Bohm, and her marriage is the guarantee that the power structure remains intact. In reference to Douglas Sirk’s “weepie” melodramas, Fassbinder once remarked that “love is the best, most perfidious, and most effective instrument of social oppression” (*Anarchy of the Imagination*, 84), and in *Lola* he demonstrates this mechanism to perfection.



#### 48. *Lola* (1981), dir. Rainer Werner Fassbinder

*Lola* metaphorically demonstrates, then, the arrangements on which the FRG was built, but it is not Fassbinder's aim merely to expose the double morality and ideology of the economic miracle—he was not a moralist. According to Märthesheimer, “*Lola* is also a film about the erosion of bourgeois values under Adenauer, about the junking of conservative ideals in the name of a quick buck” (quoted in Press Guide to *Lola*, n.p.). The debris of war was pushed aside, but there was no coming to terms with the past; economic reconstruction went hand in hand with political restoration. Von Bohm sees through what is happening, as is revealed in his inaugural address in the town hall, but he believes that the reconstruction will not succeed without “expansive powers,” so he doesn't offer any resistance and instead supports Schuckert's plans. Ultimately, then, von Bohm caves in to the capitalist principle. (In this posture, Fassbinder saw a correspondence to the Social Democrats, who, with the 1959 Godesberg Program forswearing all Marxist ideas, gave up their demands for a reform policy of their own.)

Shortly after *Lola*, Fassbinder supplied the missing second part of the trilogy: *Veronika Voss*. Tellingly, *Veronika Voss* was the last film he was able to complete. His next project was to have been a film about Rosa Luxemburg. But in the early morning hours of June 10, 1982—he had just made some notes on the treatment by Märthesheimer and Fröhlich—Rainer Werner Fassbinder died of a lethal combination of cocaine and barbiturates. Manifestly, this was a

director who knew how to give his endings, in life as in art, the force of a blow to the solar plexus.

In *Lola's* own ending, as revised by Fassbinder (from Märthesheimer and Fröhlich's screenplay) and turned into a refrain, von Bohm returns to the pastoral paradise where he "deflowered" Lola, accompanied by her young daughter, who unwittingly re-creates her mother's provocative pose in the hayloft: a harbinger of future sellouts. Lola is thus a character at once real and allegorical, trying to make her way through a misbegotten postwar Germany—a country and time into which Fassbinder himself was born on May 31, 1945, twenty-four days after the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allied armies of Europe. Rainer Werner Fassbinder dedicated his final energies to bringing those lost gray days, and years, back to life, perhaps because they offered the clearest and least obstructed view of humanity at its most vulnerable.

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## Mrinal Sen's *The Case Is Closed*

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Now over ninety, Mrinal Sen has made around thirty feature-length films (together with a number of shorts and documentaries), although few of them have been shown in the United States—and none until the American premiere of *The Case Is Closed* (1982) in 1984. Inarguably, the delay in Sen's U.S. reception has been an ill wind, but it may have blown a little good. That is because, even though his work is distinguished by the attention it pays to the lives of the underprivileged in India ("untouchables," pavement dwellers, servants), most of his films until around 1979 (until *And Quiet Rolls the Dawn*, that is, whose setting and theme resemble those of *The Case Is Closed*) were highly polemical; indeed, in the first part of his career, he could have been described as a utopian visionary of the fervently Marxist kind. His earlier films were so overtly or urgently political that they earned Sen a reputation as India's preeminent activist moviemaker.

I am glad, therefore, that *The Case Is Closed* arrived in the United States first, for it is a watchful, implicative film for the most part, not a blatantly obtrusive, finger-pointing one. Like Sen's later pictures in general (he began his career in 1955, as did Satyajit Ray), and like the best films of the Italian neorealists (whom Marxists once attacked for describing the symptoms of social problems rather than probing their capitalist-generated causes), *The Case Is Closed* thus adopts a subdued tone that trusts the audience to draw its own conclusions from what it has seen—which is one description of humanistic art as opposed to agit-prop, or agitational propaganda. This is not to say Sen's earlier films aren't worth seeing, just that they require the gentler introduction that works like *The Case Is Closed*, *The Kaleidoscope* (1981), and *The Ruins* (1983) can provide.

I saw *The Case Is Closed* again recently and would like to treat it here, not only because this film got very little coverage upon its initial release in the U.S., but also because it concerns the lot of marginalized children. The story is not told from their point of view, however, though the children in this instance happen to be first-time performers as well. Not so the adults, who are professionals, but, importantly where professionals are concerned, actors with whom this Bengali Indian director has worked on other films in the past. Adapting his screenplay from a 1974 novel by Ramapada Chowdhury, Sen seems to have wanted to decrease the distance between his two primary adult actors and their roles—between fiction and reality, as it were—by substituting their own first names for the first names that Chowdhury gave to his characters. Moreover, the director includes himself in the equation, for he gives his last name to the family that this man and woman head.

Calcutta during a cold spell in 1981 is the setting. Anjan and Mamata Sen (yes, these characters have the same surname as the film director) are a modestly comfortable couple with a small, lovable son. Because both parents are busy

working and their child needs care, they do what many of their friends do: they engage a boy of eleven or twelve, a country boy from a poor family, to live with them as a servant and baby sitter. (The youngster's father turns him over to the couple reluctantly, with great tenderness.) But because the Calcutta winter lasts only two months, the Sens do not buy warmer clothes for their domestic helper; and he is directed to sleep in a damp, unheated cubbyhole under a stairwell. One night, it's so cold that the boy goes to sleep in the kitchen, which is windowless and has a small, coal-fired stove that is still burning. Ignorant of the perils of sleeping in such a space without proper ventilation, he dies of carbon-monoxide poisoning—in a room, furthermore, that is mysteriously locked from the inside.

This is the pivotal event in *The Case Is Closed*, and it happens early. We then follow the effect of the boy's death on the people concerned, and it's like following a laboratory dye as it filters through tissues—staining each one of them differently. No one is criminally to blame for the houseboy's asphyxiation, which was accidental, but different sorts of blame, of guilt, are underscored by it. The film touches, for example, on the economic conditions that made it necessary for a peasant father to lease out his son (contrasted with the Sens' pampering of their own young son), and also on the way the police treat the bereaved family more with bureaucratic regulation than human sympathy. Indeed, it is only when the deceased youth's father comes to the Sens' house to collect his son's monthly salary that he receives the shattering news of the boy's death: and not from his employers, but (in an added twinge) from another small boy who has the same job, in the apartment upstairs, as the lad who died and who hovers outside doors and windows, watching and listening—and contemplating what might have been his fate.



#### 49. *The Case Is Closed* (1982), dir. Mrinal Sen

But the real focus of *The Case Is Closed* is on Anjan and Mamata, whose initial reaction to what has happened is one of surprise and fear. It had not occurred to them, you see, that their servant's life was uncomfortable or that his living

requirements were in any way similar to their own. Their fears increase after the family comes to claim the body, for the police are conducting a postmortem and may, with the urging of the boys' parents, bring charges of negligence against the Sens. Added to their dilemma is the fact that crowds of inquisitive neighbors have got wind of the incident and, seeking news about the "crime," have converged on the couple's residence in footage that has a documentary air about it. Moreover, when the husband finally consults a lawyer, this man quickly exposes the falsity of Anjan's claim that he treated the servant boy just like one of the family.

Under the pressure of their secret guilt, the Sens even curry favor with the father of the deceased, offering to let him spend the night in their home, in a nice bed with a thick mattress and warm quilts. But the grieving man's sentiments prevent him from availing himself of such a luxury, and he says he wants to sleep in the kitchen where his son slept and died. After obtaining the boy's body and taking it to a burning *ghat* for cremation, the hapless father, who is anything but litigious or vindictive, actually goes so far as to *ask permission* from the Sens to return to his native village. So Anjan and Mamata do indeed escape prosecution, but, despite their self-protection tinged with aggressive defense, they have not escaped their own misgivings about the conditions under which they made their young servant live and work. And those growing misgivings give *The Case Is Closed* its quiet, steady momentum until, in the end, the real closing of the case occurs with the uneasy closing of the Sen family circle, or one lone clan, against the world.



### 50. *The Case Is Closed* (1982), dir. Mrinal Sen

Only once does Mrinal Sen let his former polemical self intrude on this understated film: when the dead boy's relatives huddle around a fire in the street, waiting for morning and the chance to claim the body, the flames light up revolutionary graffiti on the wall behind them. Related to this, only a few

times does Sen let cinema-consciousness obtrude: he uses several freeze frames in a picture that does not require such italicization, and occasionally he lets the sound of the next scene begin under the current scene—a device that can be subtly used to suggest a continuous or eternal present, but which here, where the agonizing present speaks for itself, is merely distracting. For the most part in *The Case Is Closed*, Sen achieves one sort of film purity: we are simply present at an inquiry, with no sense of tortuous manipulation or easy irony through angles, editing, composition, or musical score.

The cinematic style, then, is “no style,” or “styleless style,” a *via negativa* that does not in any way pressure us to admire the director. To make a film in such a manner requires more experience than one would think—and not just of filmmaking. One further example: the cinematography by K. K. Mahajan, who has also worked with Sen before. Mahajan’s palette is controlled to make every unquestionably real object before our eyes—a chair, a table, a bed—look almost (therefore unobtrusively) as if it were a cutout, as if we were watching a realistic morality play unfold (as it would have done during the medieval period) on something less than a realistic stage. The effect is not to make us discount setting and environment in the creation of this drama, in their influence on Anjan and Mamata as well as the dead boy’s family. Instead, it is to disattach the central characters of the film from their immediate setting—invisibly, as it were (rather than crudely or forcibly to do so through rack focusing)—in the way only extreme grief, fear, and guilt can subjectively do. The effect of this cinematography is additionally, and ingeniously, to make *The Case Is Closed* linger in our minds or return to our senses, because all during its screening, it has required us—imaginatively, visually, morally, judicially—to complete it, to join the foreground to the background and hence to a higher plane.

The principal actors, guided by Sen of course, heighten our added feeling of espionage (let us call it) on, and involvement with, the confidentiality of their performances. This is a kind of acting that precludes display and is thus easily underrated as mere “behaving,” which it decidedly is not. There’s a close parallel between the acting here and the look of the film itself: the actor needs skill—enough skill to ignore skill, to concentrate on congruence with character, on permitting us to peep and eavesdrop and participate rather than to project at us. Mamata Shankar (niece of the sitarist Ravi Shankar) and Anjan Dutt have that skill, as do even the two first-time actors who play the servant boys. (Dehapatim Das Gupta plays Hari, the domestic helper in the upstairs apartment, but, in an irony that bespeaks his character’s status, the name of the Sens’ houseboy has not been available to me, and I don’t recall that his character’s first or last name was ever used in the film.)

At the time *The Case Is Closed* was made, Mamata Shankar had played in three previous Sen films, while Anjan Dutt played the lead in the picture Sen

made just before this one (*The Kaleidoscope*). Shankar is primarily a dancer, which means that, in a compelling paradox, she gives Mamata a consummate, external grace that is belied by her extreme inner torment. Dutt, for his part, has had theater experience (has in fact performed in Europe), which means that he knows how to turn his seemingly continuous presence on screen into a prolonged journey into the interior, just as longer and longer acquaintance with a person in life not only tells us more about him but often alters what we thought we knew about him. In sum, in this film it takes two fine performers from other media—dance and theater—to prove something about the cinema that is rarely paid attention: its superior ability to explore human interiority, the intimacies of the heart and mind, the internal growth or change of a character over time.

Subsequent to my re-screening of *The Case Is Closed*, I made it a point to see *Ten Days in Calcutta: A Portrait of Mrinal Sen* (1984), a documentary by the German director Reinhard Hauff. (Sen and Hauff converse in English.) It's a fascinating portrait of Sen, of a career dedicated to personal, compassionate, concerned filmmaking, of a man working through the years with a small group of colleagues in modest quarters so as to deal cinematically with his world—to put that world on film in a way that he envisions it, without the interference of those who would make only money from the movies. At one point in the documentary, Sen takes Hauff through Calcutta and reveals how this brawling and impoverished, yet vital, city has nourished him. The place and the people come first, in other words, not the fiction and the finance, which is one way of distinguishing the indigenous neorealist cinema of any decade from the global, retro-formalist or fantasist imposture that—ever in the name of “progressive” art, on the one hand, or entertainment as a “growth” industry, on the other—would colonize it.

One of the arguments against tragedy is that it supports the status quo, supports the classical view of the world: the view that, in the instance of *The Case Is Closed*, the social problem of indentured children in underdeveloped countries cannot be solved because it is a product of circumstances beyond our control, we must resign ourselves to this fact, and all that we can do is confer, through art, a measure of tragic dignity on the children, like the boy in Sen's film, who suffer. Those who prefer the social documentary to the social-problem film endorse this argument against tragedy; those who are less doctrinaire, like Mrinal Sen, and this critic, recognize the validity of both forms.

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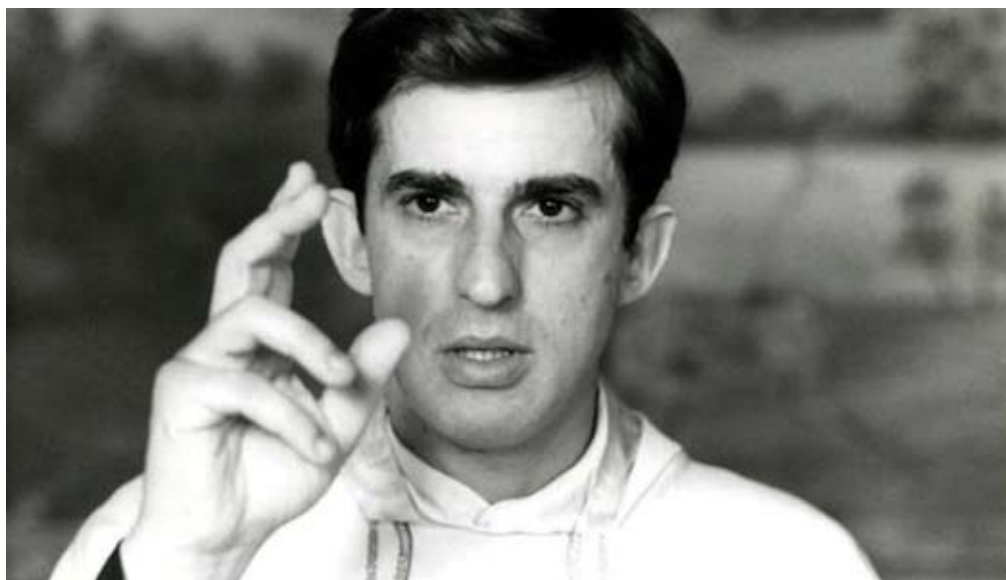


## Nanni Moretti's *The Mass Is Ended*

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*The Mass Is Ended* (1985), the third feature by the Italian director Nanni Moretti and the first to be released in the United States (to be followed by *Dear Diary* in 1993 and *The Son's Room* in 2001), is simple but subtle, aggressive yet winning. *The Mass Is Ended* was made in 1985; it took three years to get to the United States and left quickly, after receiving a lukewarm to negative response from the New York press, which never knows quite what to do with new works from unheralded directors.

Moretti has become known as the “Italian Woody Allen” because he writes, directs, and stars in movies that frequently feature autobiographical threads in addition to mixing humor with pathos. But there is none of Allen’s (rapidly vanishing) physical comedy in Moretti’s work; there is no physical resemblance between two men (the Italian is tall, slim, bearded, and good-looking); and, for all its comic touches, Moretti’s cinema is predominantly, uniquely serious in modes much deeper than Allen could ever hope to explore. Moreover, the central position of psychoanalysis in Allen’s life and films is often replaced, in Moretti’s, with politics. *Red Wood Pigeon* (1989), for example, was about the problems of a politically radical water-polo player—which the leftist Moretti himself once was, on the Italian national team—while *Ecce Bombo* (1978) concerned a disillusioned student’s struggle to recover the fervor of his erstwhile political militancy.



### 51. *The Mass Is Ended* (1985), dir. Nanni Moretti

*The Mass Is Ended*, for its part, is a comedy-drama in which Moretti himself plays a priest in a modern-day, citified Italy not as smitten with priests and the Catholic Church as it once was—if it ever was . . . (Moretti has played the lead in a number of his films to date, in addition to directing them and writing or co-

writing their scripts.) He's known as Giulio in the film, and our first glimpse of him, in the opening shots, is in ordinary clothing, not in his habit. In this sequence he walks alone, fishes alone, then swims alone in a long shot that emphasizes his solitariness. We do not discover that he's a priest until, in the next sequence, we watch him perform a marriage. Moretti the director has thus established from the first—and established *visually*, not through language—that this will be the story of a man who is also a priest, not of a priest whose character as a man is more or less beside the point.

Right after marrying the couple, Giulio leaves his island parish with them for Rome, his hometown, where they will honeymoon and where he will take over a small church on the outskirts of the city—a church that has fallen on hard times after losing its former priest to marriage and, insult to injury, to a home right across the street. The first shot in Rome is of Giulio's back as he sits on a wall overlooking the city, and it sets the tone for what follows (we will get several more shots of his back during the film): his growing frustration in an urban world over which he in particular and the Church in general have less and less influence.



## 52. *The Mass Is Ended* (1985), dir. Nanni Moretti

To be sure, *The Mass Is Ended* is a comic as well as a serious look at Giulio's frustration, and one excellent example of both strains occurs on his first day at his new church. He is napping on a cot in his stark quarters when a soccer ball comes flying through the window. Giulio sullenly picks it up and walks out the door to find a courtyard full of boys. He moves toward them and they back off—all of this in nearly choreographed movement. Then he kicks the ball into their midst and joins in the game. Soon, however, he trips, hits the asphalt, and does not get up; the boys, whom one would expect to rush to his aid, completely ignore him and continue playing. Moretti has given us a small comic ballet in this scene, but he has also told us that Giulio's priestly authority is largely symbolic and very vulnerable to the hazards—the heedlessness—of modern existence. To emphasize his point cinematically, he includes a number of overhead or high-angle shots, of

Giulio on his cot and of Giulio playing soccer, which make the character appear smaller and weighed down.

Giulio's sphere of declining influence begins, or perhaps it would be better to say ends, with his family. He is happy to be able to see his parents and sister again regularly, but he is angrily unhappy at what he learns: that Valentina, his sister, is pregnant by her nonentity of a boyfriend, Simone, and is determined to have an abortion; that his father is about to leave his mother and move in with a woman named Arianna, whom he has been seeing for a year and who is young enough to be his daughter. Is Giulio able to change the minds of his father and sister, like a good priest? Absolutely not. Not only does he not change their minds, but he reacts to their willfulness with willfulness of his own and even with violence.

Giulio tells Valentina that he will kill her first and then himself if she has an abortion; he roughs up her boyfriend in an attempt to convince him that he should try to talk Valentina out of aborting her child; and Giulio bodily throws his father out of church for declaring both that he wants to have a child by Arianna and that he wants his son to hear his confession—in other words, that he wants to continue sinning at the same time that he is absolved of his sins. (When I was a boy, my non-Catholic friends thought that this was the greatest, and the most damning, part of being Catholic.) Such a zealot is this priest that he can tearfully tell his dead mother how much he loves her at the same time that he says he will never forgive her for having committed the mortal sin of suicide.

Giulio has very little to do in the film with his parishioners. This is not only because he doesn't have many (he celebrates his first mass before a totally empty house!) but also because, as I suggested earlier, Moretti is interested less in the sacrament of the priesthood, in the priest as servant of/example to his congregation, than in the character of a man attempting to join his role as priest with his roles as son, brother, and friend. (Compare Moretti's seriocomic treatment of a priest attempting in this way to bring the Church to the world with Robert Bresson's somber *Diary of a Country Priest* [1951], in which a curate attempts to bring the world to the Church. Bresson *is* interested in the sacrament of the priesthood, and his film is about the martyrdom of a priest both to his own unmitigated piety and to his parishioners' befuddlement in the face of his exhortations that they imitate it.)

Giulio would be a priest in the world, then, as well as in the church, and what he learns in the course of the film is that modern, urban Italians, and perhaps modern, urban Catholics in general, would rather keep their religion separate from their lives. They would rather turn to religion as a last recourse from life than as a first resource in it, or would rather use religion simply as a means of marking life's stages: baptism in infancy, communion and confirmation in early adolescence, marriage as an adult, death in old age.



### 53. *The Mass Is Ended* (1985), dir. Nanni Moretti

Before he became a priest, Giulio had run a political newspaper with his friend André, who later became a terrorist; Giulio's goal, as his sister reveals, had been to improve the world. This is still his goal, except that now he believes that the first step to changing the world is awakening the spiritual lives of its inhabitants. (Who said that Marxism and Christianity could not be reconciled?) And the first spirits he attempts to rekindle are those of his family and friends, because he knows them best, cares most about them, and wants desperately to make a difference in their lives. But he fails with his family, and he fails with four of his friends from pre-priesthood days: André the once-imprisoned terrorist, who wants nothing to do with Giulio or his religion and who is resigned to the failure of his own, political mission; Saverio, whose unluckiness in love has turned him into a recluse for whom life has no meaning; Gianni, an unrepentant homosexual who is otherwise Giulio's closest friend; and Cesare, who converts to Catholicism as an escape from the trials of modern existence and who even wants to become a priest, but whose hyper-religiosity causes Giulio to deny him the opportunity.

At the end of the film, Giulio officiates at the wedding of Cesare and Antonella, at which are present his father (without Arianna), his sister (without Simone), his three additional friends (one of them, Saverio, *with* his ex-wife, Astrid), and stand-ins for himself as a little boy and his mother as a young woman. After Giulio declares, "The mass is ended. Go in peace," the bride and groom begin to dance and are joined by more couples. The last shot of Giulio shows him smiling beneficently upon his congregation. But this is a bittersweet comic reconciliation, a qualified "dance of life," for Giulio has declared his intention to leave his Roman parish for an isolated, windswept one in Tierra del Fuego, where he feels he will truly be needed and where he will be less a priest to the people than their friend.

Giulio, you see, has given up trying to integrate religion into modern, urban existence, with all its distractions and temptations, and will once again become a priest on an island, where his office will be as much to mirror the natural simplicity of his parishioners' lives as to mediate between them and their God. Only the unadorned life, challenged by the elements, leaves room for the growth of the spirit and the recognition of God. Anything else just gets in the way: this is what Giulio has come to believe.

What's not in a film is often as important as what's in it, and what's not in *The Mass Is Ended* is the seduction of our handsome young cleric; in a lesser work on the same subject you can be sure that you would get at least a scene of temptation. Moretti gives us something far subtler: we *do* see Giulio's temptation, but it occurs over the telephone. Four times during the film he calls a woman, and in each instance one of three things happens: he gets her answering machine; he gets no answer; or he hangs up shortly after placing the call. I assume that this is a woman Giulio knew in Rome before he became a priest and has not seen since taking his vows, just as he had not seen any of his four friends since taking them, either (one friend, Saverio, did not even know that he had become a priest). Moretti thus shows us that Giulio is fighting the temptation of female companionship (a temptation that he cannot avoid in a large city like Rome?), not being pursued by some beauty anxious to bed a priest: you choose which scenario is more realistic. After the last telephone call to the woman, he sits down in a café next to a little girl, who reads to him a loving letter she has just written to her father. Giulio then tells her that he loves her and everyone else in the café, and this incident seems to call him back to his duties as priestly father.

Moretti shows Giulio fighting womanly temptation in instances other than those on the telephone. Several times Antonio, the former priest of Giulio's Roman parish, talks lustily of sex and naked women, and in each instance Giulio cuts him off with a vehemence that springs from more than simple priestly modesty. Let me explain. Antonio had wanted to remain a priest after he got his Lucia pregnant and then married her; he argues that his love for his wife and son would have enhanced his vocation, not detracted from it. Officially, Giulio disagrees with him; unofficially, he seems to sense that the marriage of priests could become a model for the combining of a religious life with a worldly one, and his "protesting too much" in the face of Antonio's bawdy talk implies as much.

Everything about *The Mass Is Ended* is good, from Nicola Piovani's music, which manages to be at once wistful and inspiring, to Franco Di Giacomo's cinematography, which uses the Italian sun as a warm backdrop for its color and not as a bleaching element in it. This is a gentle, embracing sun, not a harsh and piercing one. There is no harsh light in the film, just as there is no darkness: there is not a single night scene (we find characters sleeping or about to go to sleep,



but always during the day). In this way, Moretti has chosen to play out what is for Giulio essentially a dark drama against the brightest and most serene—and therefore seemingly the most indifferent—of backgrounds. And he has played his own dark, brooding character to perfection, even when—especially when—that character is the object of comedy.

This man who would be a priest in the world is forever running up against opposition to his mere existence as a human being, some of it physical or violent, as in the incident cited earlier that took place during the boys' soccer game, and as when he suffers a sort of murderous baptism in a public fountain at the hands of a Roman whom he has accused of stealing his parking place. Giulio doesn't plead for mercy here on the grounds that he is a priest, and his assailant does not once acknowledge him as one. This is wildly funny, because completely unexpected. It also rings terribly true, because Moretti plays it absolutely straight. He milks no laughs, he tries to elicit no pity: he simply remains his character's angry, searching, persistent human self, and he wants the self recognized before the collar. Giulio is inspired, not prideful, and his story is fantastic to the extent that he is probably the priest that many an ex-seminarian (like me) wishes he had become.

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## Carlos Saura's *Ay, Carmela!*

While Franco was alive, the Spanish director Carlos Saura made several films implicitly (and sometimes not so implicitly) critical of the dictator's regime and the civil war that established his rule: among them *The Hunt* (1966) and *Cousin Angelica* (1973) stand out. But after Franco's death in 1975, Saura stopped making such movies, and the result has been a decline in the thematic substance of his work—I am thinking particularly of *Antonieta* (1982), and *The Stilts* (1984) as well as the ballet films *Blood Wedding* (1981), *Carmen* (1983), and *Love the Magician* (1986). So desperately in search of a subject and a style was Saura that he returned to his neorealist roots in *Hurry, Hurry* (1980), a film about adolescent street life in Madrid that recalls both his own first feature, *The Delinquents* (1959)—which tells the story of slum boys trying to escape from poverty as bullfighters—and one of the best movies about street children, *Los olvidados* (1950), directed by Saura's friend and mentor Luis Buñuel.



### 54. *Ay, Carmela!* (1989), dir. Carlos Saura

In *Ay, Carmela!* (1989), Carlos Saura confronts the evil of Francoism once again, despite the fact that “El Caudillo” had been dead for over fifteen years by this time, and one can only conclude from the quality of the film that Saura's art, like some people's lives, achieves its highest pitch when it can direct its energies against a foe—the foe in this case. Which is not to say that *Ay, Carmela!*, or any of the director's other films that treat the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath, is propaganda, only that it depends on the specter of Generalissimo Franco to reinforce the truth of its tragicomedy. Saura and Rafael Azcona adapted their script from the play by José Sanchis Sinisterra, which I have not read but of which, in

a *formal* sense, there seems to be little trace. No one would mistake *Ay, Carmela!* merely for a play that has been filmed, so completely have Azcona and Saura fused word and image, language and location.

That location is Aragon, as, in 1938, two vaudevillians, Carmela and her husband, Paulino, together with their mute, adolescent guitarist, Gustavete, entertain Republican troops at the front. Even though they are Republican sympathizers whose mission is to boost the morale of front-line troops, Carmela, Paulino, and Gustavete decide to retreat to Valencia, a safer locale, after an enemy bombing raid. Along the way, they are intercepted by Falangist soldiers, who imprison them for aiding the Red cause and then, instead of executing them, force them to entertain Nationalist troops. In order to do this, they must substitute pro-Franco material for their pro-Republican numbers—something the practical Paulino finds much easier to do than the high-spirited Carmela.

In one instance, Paulino must recite an ode to Fascism by Federico de Urrutia instead of an ode to Republicanism by Antonio Machado; in another instance, Carmela must play a whore dressed in the blue, yellow, and red Republican flag who has been impregnated by the nation of Russia (in the person of Gustavete, wearing a red shirt emblazoned with a black hammer and sickle), instead of playing the figure of Liberty clothed in a white dress and holding the scales of justice. She attempts to play the whore of the Republic but finally cannot, twice interrupting her Fascist *début* with Loyalist sentiments that are taken up by Polish prisoners from the International Brigade, one of whom is smitten with Carmela and all of whom are to be executed the next day. They sit in the balcony of the Teatro Goya, enjoying their last hours of life; Carmela commands the stage, sacrificing her life to their cause when a Falangist fires on her from the orchestra after her second pro-Republican outburst.

Gustavete moans over the body of this woman who has behaved like a mother toward him, but his moans—the first and only sounds he makes in the film—should not be mistaken for speech, as some critics have argued, the gift of which he has miraculously received as a result of Carmela's "martyrdom" and which he will now use to carry on the Republican struggle. In the first place, Gustavete, Carmela, and Paulino are entertainers, not political reformers. In the second place, Gustavete's moans are purely an emotional reaction to the loss of his mother-substitute and co-performer; he does not repeat them and, even if he did, it would take a long time as well as a strenuous effort to turn them into actual speech.

Indeed, so strongly does Carmela's death affect Gustavete, so deeply does he respond to it on a human level as opposed to a political one, that he surrenders the only means he has had up to now for communicating with her and Paulino: his small chalkboard, which he places atop her grave bearing the inscription "Carmela, 1900-1938." The implication is that Gustavete has nothing more to say now that Carmela is gone, not that his tongue has been loosed by the Falangist violence

against her; that Carmela, with her chalk-marked grave, is one more anonymous casualty of the Spanish Civil War, not that her death will inspire Gustavete and his cohorts to rise up against the Fascist menace.

Saura's shooting of the final scene underlines its somber, fatalistic quality: the camera tracks over a barren, wintry landscape to find Paulino and Gustavete completing Carmela's burial, then remains in long shot as they board their loaded truck and disappear into the distance down a muddy road. Accompanying them on the soundtrack is "Ay, Carmela!", the folk song (the words and music to this song, and to others in Paulino and Carmela's variety act, are by Alejandro Masso) with which the film began, and a testimony far less to this woman's Republican allegiance than to her human magnetism.

So *Ay, Carmela!* is not an allegory of political opportunism become political virtue, with proletarian sentiment winning out in the end. Paulino is no political opportunist: he is a vaudevillian who rightly fears for his and his wife's lives at the hands of the Falangists and does what he must to survive, as does Carmela—until, almost in spite of herself, and spurred on by the presence of the condemned Poles in the balcony of the theatre, she screams what she really thinks of her Falangist hosts. My point is that Paulino and Carmela, together with Gustavete, are faced with an irresolvable dilemma: entertain the enemy or die, appear to collaborate with the Fascists or be executed by them. Political *calculation*, be it disguised as rightism or leftism, never enters into their decision-making; these are simple people caught up on the stage of world history, doing the best they can under the circumstances.



### 55. *Ay, Carmela!* (1989), dir. Carlos Saura

For an illumination of how well Saura meshes the particular with the universal, the individual with the world-historical, compare *Ay, Carmela!* with Truffaut's tepid *The Last Metro* (1980), where a theatre company continues to produce its

usual fare in a Nazi-occupied Paris that, except for its anti-Semitism, would be the Paris of old. The Jewish director of this company waits out the war in the cellar of his theatre, while his wife, its leading actress, takes over as manager and in the process falls in love with a newly hired young actor. Not to worry: the Jewish director survives the Occupation unscathed, as does his marriage and the career of the young actor. Unlike Saura, Truffaut does not put his actors in the position of having to choose between producing theatre tailored to the enemy's taste and being killed. They face no such crucible, which means that Truffaut forfeits not only the opportunity to extend our comprehension of what a theatrical life can be like under the direction of the enemy, but also the opportunity unavailable to Saura's "low" vaudevillians—to fill his company's bill with plays whose high art was designed to mask the truth they were telling about, and before, tyrants. Sartre's *The Flies* (1943) and Anouilh's *Antigone* (1943) are two such instances from the period, and the drama's metaphorical strategy was taken up by film as well (for example, in Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir* [1942]).

One metaphor that Saura does take up is the familiar "all the world's a stage," and it works in *Ay, Carmela!*, as it does not in *The Last Metro*, because it is earned: the world of politics and war *has* penetrated Carmela and Paulino's variety act, to the point that Carmela gives her life onstage for her politics, for her irrepressible belief in the Loyalist cause as well as for the irresistible opportunity to play the role of Republican antagonist in the drama of the Spanish Civil War. Ironically, it was Carmela's theatrical gift (and ripe beauty) that saved her, along with Paulino and Gustavete, from execution by the Falangists, and now it is that same gift, uncontained by the bounds of the Teatro Goya stage, that gets her killed. Fittingly, shortly before her death, Carmela sings a rousing hymn to her country in which her life—together with the lives of *all* of Spain's soldiers, Fascists and Republicans alike—converges with her art on the last line: "Spain, I die for you."

That convergence was visually suggested during Carmela, Paulino, and Gustavete's interrogation by Lieutenant Ripamonte, an Italian fighting on Franco's side who is in charge of boosting the morale of Falangist troops. Ripamonte fashions himself a man of the theatre—he says he had been a director back home, but Paulino believes that he was little more than a stagehand—who knows an *artiste* when he sees one, hence his plucking of these three *artistes* from prison camp for the purpose of playing to crowds of Italian and Spanish soldiers. At the start of the lieutenant's questioning (for the record, Carmela, Paulino, and Gustavete are charged with "attempting to infiltrate the Nationalist rear guard"), the apparently small interrogation room is illuminated only by a desk lamp, and tension is created by repeated cutting between Ripamonte and the trio. Once it becomes clear, however, that the Italian is really interviewing or auditioning the entertainers, not preparing to pronounce sentence upon them, the house lights come up in long shot and reveal the cavernous inside of the Teatro Goya, on whose

stage this audition has been taking place and from which the relieved Paulino blurts out, “Long live Mussolini!”

It is no accident that this theatre bears the name “Goya,” since *Ay, Carmela!*, like other films by Saura (most notably, *The Garden of Delights* [1970] and *Anna and the Wolves* [1972]), is filled with instances of *esperpento*, a blend of the grotesque and the macabre, of the deadly serious and the darkly comic, to be found in the work of Goya as well as Quevedo, Gracián, Valle-Inclán, and Buñuel. Why is *esperpento*, or let us simply say the grotesque, particularly suited to the subject of *Ay, Carmela!*? Because the grotesque is essentially a marriage of malicious irony and low comedy, and it is attended by a pervasive distortion and leveling of values to a common standard. Not only are moral differences among characters sharply reduced but possible options open to them in the sphere of ethical action as well: one value seems to infect the others. In other words, the characters of *esperpento* are robbed of the comfort that their troubles are attributable to fateful, if not in fact divine, forces beyond their control at the same time that they are deprived of the social affirmation that comes at the end of comedy in the form of marriage and family feasting.

Several times during *Ay, Carmela!*, for example, Carmela—who took her wedding vows before a justice of the peace—expresses her desire to be married in a Catholic church and her regret at never having overruled Paulino’s objection to conceiving a child out of their vibrantly sexual relationship. Her husband, who once trained for the priesthood, promises her a church wedding if only she will dutifully perform her role in their new pro-Franco show, a role that Carmela resists not only out of her loyalty to the Republic but also out of menstrual melancholy. But Carmela never gets her church wedding (or a Catholic burial, for that matter), nor do we ever see her and Paulino pray to God for solace or participate in the solemn feast of the Eucharist. In fact, at what is a feast for this hungry pair—spaghetti with a glass of wine, provided by the Falangists—Carmela quips, “If the Fascists always eat as well as this, we’ve lost the war.” One vision thus seems to infect the other in this film and other works of *esperpento*: the comic attitude mocks the serious, and the serious attitude whittles away at the comic. The result: a world bereft of both the consolation of a divine or at least deterministic framework and the benefit of a restored social order, plus a world in which moral differences as well as ethical options are reduced to such an extent that Paulino can appear to be a Fascist collaborator, Lieutenant Ripamonte a benign figure of fun, and Carmela a sentimental hysteric.

Early on we get the first evidence that *Ay, Carmela!* is not going to be just another film about the good fight against the evil of Fascism. Paulino follows Carmela onstage in Aragon and fervently recites a patriotic poem by Antonio Machado, after which the crowd abruptly calls for his “farting routine.” Paulino

has apparently passed gas on demand in previous shows and now does so again to great applause! Moral gravity has been punctured by coarse buffoonery in a way that makes us question, not the film's seriousness, but the world's—the sound judgment, the good faith, the social compact of a world at war, terribly divided against itself and therefore terribly willing to accommodate, in the name of victory, juxtapositions of the high and low, the exalted and the ignoble, the life force and the death wish.

At least twice during *Ay, Carmela!* actual death scenes follow on the heels of scenes of liveliness. As a handsome Pole innocently courts Carmela right before Paulino's bulging eyes in a makeshift Falangist prison, several Republicans are selected at random from their midst, taken outside, and put to death before a firing squad as well as before the eyes of Carmela and Paulino, who observe, along with the camera, from a window. The morning after their raucous, diverting visit to the Teatro Goya for Carmela and Paulino's performance, the Polish members of the International Brigade are shot, which means that, although Saura does not show their murders—there would be too many of them, they would draw focus away from Carmela, and the director has already depicted one convincing instance of the Fascist execution of justice—they die at about the time Carmela is buried.

One of the men killed during the execution that Saura does film is the town's Communist mayor, and it is in his captured house that Carmela and the ever amorous Paulino, who are supposed to be rehearsing, have sex after her initial reluctance to do so on the bed of a dead man, especially when that man and his wife appear to look down at them from photographs on the wall! So obsessed with bedding Carmela is Paulino that together they create a pet term for sexual intercourse—"taking a trip to Uruguay"—and use it as the title of a courtship dance they do as part of their theatrical act. Immediately upon seeing them do their mating dance on the stage of the Teatro Goya, we listen to a chorus of Italian soldiers, led by Lieutenant Ripamonte, sing a song in honor of their comrades who have fallen in battle—a song whose solemnity is undercut by its own singers, whom a Spanish colonel calls "fairies" and who hop onto and off the stage like a bunch of rabbits.

The grotesqueness of this juxtaposition, and of other such juxtapositions in *Ay, Carmela!*, is aesthetically jarring, is deracinating, if you will, and one could argue that by deracinating or distancing his audience Saura felt he could get it to look at the Spanish Civil War, and war in general, with fresh eyes—eyes otherwise accustomed for the most part to moral platitudes and cinematic clichés when it comes to the treatment of this subject. In this, of course, he is no different from other artists who have used the grotesque, from Shakespeare to the Romantics to the dramatists of the Absurd, repudiators all of the abstract neoclassical principles of reason, decorum, and (poetic) justice.





**56. *Ay, Carmela!* (1989), dir. Carlos Saura**

In keeping with *esperpento*'s essentially detached view of humanity, Saura keeps his camera mostly in the medium-to-full range and is not afraid to hold it on characters instead of cutting among them for visual variety. When he does cut—sometimes to a close-up—it is usually for dramatic emphasis; when his camera travels—occasionally coming to a halt in long shot—it often does so as a newsreel camera would, in order to explore a scene of wreckage, a crowd of frightened people, a shelter full of occupied beds. What “visual variety” we get in *Ay, Carmela!* comes from the work of Saura's cinematographer, José Luis Alcaine, and even here the variety does not exist for its own sake. Alcaine tends to give us dark, rich, solidly illuminated hues in and around the theater and pale, dreary, even mist-obscured hues outside it, which is one way of contrasting the theater's life and creativity with the death and destruction that convulse the world, or of suggesting that, in this film, the drama of the Spanish Civil War will be played out where its essence can best be distilled: upon a bare, well-lighted stage.

Carmen Maura and Andres Pajares enact that drama, with an able assist from Gabino Diego as Gustavete, and both know how to create comic interest at the same time that they intimate psychological depth—not an easy task even for otherwise highly skilled actors. I previously knew Maura only from her work with that charlatan Pedro Almodóvar, so it was nice finally to see her in a film of substance. In her ability to combine dramatic power with punch, she reminds me of Anna Magnani and Giulietta Masina, although she has something that neither of those two had: genuine sex appeal. *Ay, Carmela!* succeeds, then, because it does not sacrifice Maura's character, or anyone else's, to allegorical design, because it is content to let its characters live in history instead of in the service of history—or politics.

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## Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies*

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There is plenty of good acting on display in *Secrets and Lies* (1996), the film by Mike Leigh that won the “Palme d’Or” at the 1996 Cannes Festival. Leigh is celebrated in English theater, television, and cinema for his method of collaborating with actors and developing scripts. He and each of his actors choose a real person from the actor’s life, on the basis of whom they construct a fictional character in improvisations with other cast members whose characters have been similarly created. The performers are forbidden to discuss their roles or motivations with one another, so that none of them have an overview of the story or an awareness of what is happening outside their own scenes. Himself trained as an actor at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in 1960s, Leigh believes that this approach liberates the actor’s creativity, because he is thereby freed from the pressure to produce “results”; he has only to experience truthfully what his character is undergoing in the moment—as in real life. From the improvisatory sessions as well as his cast’s “life-drawing,” or drawing characters from actual people, Leigh develops ideas from which the narrative of the piece is negotiated, so to speak, slowly constructed, then reworked over months of rehearsal. Only at the end is anything written down in the form of a script.

This method of moviemaking has been compared to that of the late John Cassavetes in such films as *Shadows* (1959), *Faces* (1963), and *Husbands* (1970), but the differences are that Cassavetes seemed concerned in his pictures more with getting the actors to spill their guts or finger their own psyches, than with penetrating the essence of the world as we all think we know it; and that the Greek-American director lacked a sense of humor about himself as well as his work. Leigh has been trying since 1971, in 16-millimeter movies made for BBC television as well as in full-scale theatrical releases, seriocomically to investigate a particular aspect of his part of the world: the lower rungs of British family life, the more anguished corners of the post-World-War-II English working class. And he has managed to conduct his cinematic investigation without the political tendentiousness bordering on religious affirmation of Ken Loach (at his worst), or the passionate self-regard approaching masochistic exaltation of Terence Davies (at his best), the two countrymen of Mike Leigh’s who are best known for treating the same central subject on film.

Leigh’s titles vacillate between ironic comment upon his chosen life-class, let us call it—*Who’s Who* (1978), *Home Sweet Home* (1982), *High Hopes, Life Is Sweet* (1990); trenchant observation of it—*Meantime* (1983), *Naked* (1993); and straightforward remark about it—*Bleak Moments* (1971), *Hard Labour* (1973), and now *Secrets and Lies*. Moreover, his de-emphasis on the machinations of plot—the result of his workshop approach to creating character first and foremost—seems peculiarly suited to some of the peripatetic, even random or aimless, lives he

studies, such as that of the abrasive drifter Johnny in *Naked*. Similarly, Leigh's focus in rehearsal primarily on the life of character or the character of life, on the artistic examination in detail of people's existences, is unusually germane to the subject of *Secrets and Lies*: the search of an adopted child for her biological mother. For the movie's questions are "Who am I?" and "How are these people related to me?"—which are exactly the questions an actor asks in the exploration of a character and his life.

*Secrets and Lies* opens with the funeral of the adoptive mother of Hortense Cumberbatch, a twenty-seven-year-old single black Londoner, whose adoptive father is also deceased. Hortense is an optometrist, and therefore it is no accident that this opening scene is cross-cut with one featuring, not her biological mother, but instead her birth mother's brother, Maurice Purley. He is a photographer whom we watch fastidiously yet genially shooting a bride at home in her wedding gown—a "shoot" soon to be followed by a scene in which Hortense amiably examines a little (white) girl for eyeglasses. Leigh thus immediately announces that his film will be concerned with seeing, with the ability to see (through frames) and the desire to be seen (in a frame), by means of the ocular as well as the camera lens. And, naturalistic artist that he is, Leigh will invoke the power of the frame to engage us, the audience, in the act of beholding, and recognizing, the lives of his ordinary human characters: strangers to whom we would not—and could not—normally give more than a moment's consideration in real life.

Furthermore, this director insistently reminds us of his naturalistic mission by five times throwing in a sequence of *tableaux*—otherwise unrelated to the "plot"—in which mainly everyday people pose for their portraits in front of Maurice's tripod. We see whole families, mothers and children, pets with their owners, groups of friends, various couples, individual achievers (like a black boxer), a few exhibitionists, and, most important, the last photographic subject: a classy young woman with a beautiful yet badly scarred face by which we are simultaneously attracted and repelled. She has the longest session before the probing camera of Purley Photography, and her face becomes the visual conceit of *Secrets and Lies*. It is a corporal metaphor for the (beautiful yet badly scarred) soul of Maurice's sister, Cynthia Rose Purley, in addition to being a grotesque commingling of two faces or facets of film: the fantastic Hollywood cinema of beautiful people and its opposite number, the naturalistic, in this case British, picture of the down-and-dirty, the nitty-gritty, or the lean-and-mean.

After her photographic session, the lovely but disfigured young lady is harassed on the street by a disheveled drunk named Stuart Christian, who turns out to be Maurice's former partner. He is disgruntled because, he claims, he built their photography business into a success only to be bought out by his associate. Like Maurice's current photographic subjects, Stuart spends only a small amount of time on screen and his "story" appears unconnected to that of Maurice, Maurice's sister,

and their respective families. However, he is clearly a meaningful “character” in his own right, a lapsed photographer in search of his camera—the great equalizer-cum-immortalizer of the twentieth century and for this reason, a kind of god unto itself. Stuart Christian does not find his god at Purley Photography, but it, in the form of Mike Leigh’s movie camera, has found him, even as it has found something like his female counterpart in Cynthia Purley.

She is Hortense Cumberbatch’s forty-two-year-old white, unwed biological mother, who supports herself with a factory job assembling boxes. Cynthia gave away Hortense, conceived when she was only fifteen, without so much as looking at the baby, has kept the birth a secret between herself and her brother ever since, and has even forgotten that her early lover was a black man. She lives with her second (white) daughter, Roxanne, the product of a fling the youthful Cynthia had with an American medical student one summer while on vacation in Spain. Although she has the intelligence to be a professional like Hortense, the bitter and angry Roxanne works as a street-sweeper in a sort of spiteful revenge on an environment that failed to nurture her. Roxanne’s revenge naturally extends to her tiptling mother, with whom she has a fuming relationship—literally as well as figuratively, since each of the women smokes!



**57. *Secrets and Lies* (1996), dir. Mike Leigh**

At the start of the film, it has been two-and-a-half years since Roxanne has seen her thirty-eight-year-old uncle, Maurice, and his wife, Monica; Cynthia herself has not seen her brother and his spouse for about a year, dating back to the day the prosperous yet childless couple moved into a large new home in one of North London’s better neighborhoods. But the Purleys’ estrangement is about to be cut

short with the approach of Roxanne's twenty-first birthday, just as Hortense's long separation from her birth mother will end as a result of the sudden death, in her fifties, of the black, Barbados-born woman (herself a midwife) who adopted her.

This death leaves the otherwise successful and self-possessed Hortense feeling lost, despite the fact that she has two adoptive adult brothers, so in the summer of 1995, two months after her adoptive mother's funeral, she decides to find her biological mother. Hortense has known since she was seven years old of her adoption, but only as the result of a British law passed in 1975—coincidentally, the year in which she turned seven—is she now entitled to learn, through a social agency, the name and address of the woman who bore her. The agency advises her not to pursue the matter on her own, to let a case worker handle it, but Hortense disregards this caution and arranges to meet Cynthia, who, somewhat comically, is as startled to discover her daughter's race as the daughter is to discover her mother's.

Their reunion is preceded by that of the warm-hearted Maurice with his equally warm-hearted sister at Cynthia's gloomy, South London row house, where both grew up, where Cynthia more or less raised Maurice after the death of their mother in 1961, and where she continues to rent despite inheriting, upon the death of her father, the money with which to make a down payment on the place or some other one. She used that money instead to set Maurice up in his own photography business, to finance the acquisition of his neighborhood studio, and her gift is a contributing factor to the deep—and moving—bond between brother and sister.

Leigh cinematically renders this bond through a long take of the weeping Cynthia in the arms of the bearish yet loving Maurice. And he repeats such a held shot at the first meeting of Hortense and Cynthia in a big but otherwise empty tea shop at Holborn railway station—except that, in this instance, the take lasts a full seven minutes without a cut. The camera “merely” remains fixed on the two women seated side by side in a full frontal shot, gingerly getting to know each other after two introductory, necessarily intercut telephone calls. They meet again a week later for dinner as well as for the celebration of Hortense's July 23<sup>rd</sup> birthday, then yet again the next week for a movie; and in this time Cynthia warms to Hortense to the point of inviting her as a “mystery guest” to Roxanne's own twenty-first birthday party, which will soon be held at Maurice and Monica's house.

I hasten to add here that there is absolutely nothing maudlin about the budding relationship between this mother and her long-lost child, or about the accompanying, seemingly resultant *détente* between the bemused Roxanne (who still does not know of her half sister's existence, yet who suspects that her mother is “seeing” someone) and the mellowing Cynthia, even though the latter must do a lot of crying in the film. But her tears are earned, and they are varied depending on the situation or the cause. So much so that, for once in a movie, crying becomes



a device for plumbing character, not for tugging at audience members' heartstrings and making *them* cry—as in such “weepies” aimed at women as *Dark Victory* (1939), *Little Boy Lost* (1953), and *Love Story* (1970).

*Secrets and Lies* proceeds through the effect that Hortense has not only on Cynthia, but also on Cynthia's whole family, gathered in the climactic scene for the party in honor of Roxanne's birthday. I deliberately did not write “the black Hortense” and “the white Purleys” in the previous sentence because this picture is not about race in the way that it would be had it been made in America. Race is a factor in *Secrets and Lies*, yes, but not a hateful, divisive, deeply ingrained one; Hortense's color makes her different and even “other,” but it does not make her despicable. Class is more of a factor here, as it is in all English films, in that, ironically or not, the educated Miss Cumberbatch speaks the Queen's English with exquisite diction, unlike her common blood relations. (For a film in which Mike Leigh does to some extent tackle the injuries of race as well as class, see *Meantime*, which is about unemployment and adolescent *angst* during the Thatcher years and features black, working-class characters who exchange insults with their equally despondent white brethren.) Oddly enough, on the surface Hortense's closest relative among the Purleys is the one to whom she is not related by blood, and who loathes the “vulgar,” “hysterical” Cynthia whom Hortense is growing to love: Monica, who speaks well, has good manners, and likes nice things, yet who views the world through the myopic eyes of an interior decorator (and an amateur, thriftless one at that), not the expansive ones of an optomtrist.



## 58. *Secrets and Lies* (1996), dir. Mike Leigh

Among the revelations at the birthday-barbecue party, in addition to the chief one that Hortense is Cynthia's biological daughter given up for adoption twenty-seven years before (not her co-worker at the box factory, as Cynthia had lied), is the truth about Monica and Maurice's childlessness: she is unable to have children, not

selfishly denying them to her husband (as Cynthia had believed), and nothing the desperate couple have done over the past fifteen years has been able to change that fact. Ironically, they have not considered, or have chosen not to pursue, adoption, even though Maurice says that his wife's infertility—together with her chronic moodiness as a result of her condition—has almost destroyed their relationship. Roxanne, for her part, practices the birth control that may have been unavailable to her mother, declares that she never wants to have any children, and initially is none too thrilled to learn—on the anniversary of her own birthday—of the birth of a half sister six years before her; she says besides that she does not even plan on moving in with her long-suffering boyfriend, Paul, let alone on marrying him. Neither Hortense nor her birth mother has a man in her life, yet neither woman seems especially troubled by her “singleness.”

What Cynthia and her two daughters have at the end is one another, even as Monica and Maurice have their marriage. These latter two say as much to each other in bed after the party in the film's penultimate scene, and then we get the final scene the next day in Cynthia's modest garden, where Mother, Hortense, and Roxanne have gathered for talk and tea. The last shot is a long, overhead, slightly off-center take of the three of them sitting together in the sun, at the end of which Cynthia rhetorically asks, “This is the life, ain't it?” It may be, but the singularity of Leigh the director's uneasy or unstable, aerial camera here causes us, if not to doubt Cynthia's certainty, then at least to question the tidiness of Leigh the writer's feel-good ending. And all the more so when we remember that Hortense's persistent questions to Cynthia about her biological father, during the two women's meeting at the train-station café as well as during their attendance at Roxanne's birthday party (where, ominously, Hortense's query comprises the last words spoken in the scene), go unanswered. They—the women together with the inquiries about paternity—seem to embody Mike Leigh's belief that “it's necessary for you to walk away from this kind of film with questions unanswered, and work to do, and matters to be faced.”

“Welcome to the family,” Maurice had comically declared to Hortense after all the painful truth telling and exasperating rancor of the birthday party. However, the comedy here derives precisely from the double-edged nature of his welcome, not merely from the conciliatory nature of his embrace after the hostilities that have preceded it: for Maurice is welcoming Hortense to the pain and rancor as well as the pleasure and affability of life with the Purleys. Fortunately, secrets have been uncovered and lies untold, but, unfortunately, the Purleys' happiness remains a fragile one, just as the comparative ease of their acceptance of Hortense may turn into relative uneasiness.

Maurice himself, the peace-making portrait photographer, the chronicler of subjects coaxed to look and act their best, knows a thing or two about the common human habit of allowing orneriness and deception, fear and vanity, to destroy

happiness—by which this movie means the closeness and connection between people, as opposed to their isolation and loneliness. It is Maurice who speaks the film's title as he rails against the destructive power of secrets and lies, to which Leigh opposes the restorative power of cinematic truth telling. And it is Maurice who, in his last scene, admits he is frightened that Monica does not love him anymore, at least not in the way she once did. Despite her protestation, it is his fear that sticks in the mind long after a screening of *Secrets and Lies*, just as it is the manner in which Leigh shoots the concluding scene more than the content itself that is etched in my memory. Like the reformed alcoholic and country-and-western singer/songwriter Mac Sledge at the end of that fine American movie *Tender Mercies* (1983), Mike Leigh seems finally not to trust happiness, and neither does his fictional alter ego, Maurice Purley.

What Mike Leigh does trust is his actors, and he shows this, for example, by not cutting during that long scene between Hortense and Cynthia in the subway-station café—a scene in which form is perfectly wedded to content, since its subject is the literal as well as figurative coming together of mother and daughter. The actresses here—Marianne Jean-Baptiste as Hortense and Brenda Blethyn in the role of Cynthia—get to act *continuously* as a twosome, as they would on a stage (and as Jean-Baptiste has done on the stage), without dependence upon close-ups or on the piecing together of segments from different takes of the same scene. And these performers, like their colleagues Timothy Spall (Maurice), Phyllis Logan (Monica), and Claire Rushbrook (Roxanne) from Leigh's informal repertory company, are able to reward their director's trust because they have had the rehearsal time—courtesy of him and his producer, Simon Channing-Williams—to prepare for scenes such as thi one.



### 59. *Secrets and Lies* (1996), dir. Mike Leigh

To be sure, Leigh is not averse to moving his camera rather than holding it steady on the characters, as he does in the tea shop; but he has to have a good

reason for doing so, and he does during the opening funeral sequence, where the tracking camera creates a fluid, dynamic language of its own to compensate for the absence of dialogue among the static mourners. Nor is this director averse to cutting between actors in a scene, to the shot-reverse-shot technique of filming, but, again, he uses it when he should, to suggest conflict or tension between speakers, not as the standard method for shooting dialogue.

For instance, the first time we see Maurice and Monica together in *Secrets and Lies*, they discuss Roxanne, about whose future they are worried and whose past seems limited, for them, to the first professional photograph her uncle ever took: of his niece as a smiling, toothy little girl. It sits atop Maurice's mantelpiece in the background of this scene between him and his wife, which apparently does no more than record a solicitous conversation between a couple about a close relative of theirs. But the editor Jon Gregory's incessant cutting between the two speakers, together with Andrew Dickson's somber tones (but not sentimental ones, here or anywhere else in the picture) on the soundtrack, suggests that something else is going on here. That "something else," we will later discover, has to do with the barren Monica's antipathy toward, combined with her jealousy of, her childbearing sister-in-law—Roxanne's mother—whom she regards as little more than a boozy floozy.

As for the look of Leigh's color film, well, it looks pretty good in a subdued or soothing way, making much use of soft blues and even turquoise in the background of the mostly interior shots. One could argue that *Secrets and Lies* might just as easily have been photographed in raw or graphic black and white, like the moving pictures of the British social realists—the "Angry Young Men"—from the late 1950s and early 1960s. But *Secrets and Lies* is not really as grim, say, as *Look Back in Anger* (1959), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), or *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner* (1962), nor is it making any kind of sociopolitical statement that needs to be removed to the world of proletarian gray; and, unlike John Cassavetes during his black-and-white phase, Mike Leigh has no interest in registering the dreary, grainy side of life for its own sordid sake. What he is interested to do is centrally examine the life of an ordinary but affecting human being under a microscope, if you will, and microscopes have a way of both opening up dirty little pores and extenuating, alleviating, or desaturating the big bright colors of life's spectrum. In other words, "microscopic" cinema such as that found in *Secrets and Lies* paradoxically enlarges our humanity at the same time as it reduces us all to our least, or our lightest, common denominator.

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## Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple*

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The cinema of the Islamic theocracy of Iran is chiefly known today for two qualities: its children's films (by which I mean movies about the young but not necessarily for them) and its self-reflexivity (by which I mean the posing of deep questions about fiction, reality, and filmmaking). It's common knowledge by now that children are often used as artistic subjects in Iran because directors there can deal with them openly and honestly—i.e., without sex, violence, philosophy, and politics, and therefore without running into the problem of censorship. Among the best pictures from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties were Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1984), Abbas Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987), Ebrahim Foruzesh's *The Jar* (1992), and Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* (1995). This is not to say that these pictures are devoid of philosophy and politics, even socio-clerical criticism, only that such grown-up themes are often cloaked in the metaphorical raiment of children's stories, which themselves frequently blur the line between documentary and fiction. Children do the same, of course, but, again, the purpose of such blurring here is less mimetic than metaphorical: to investigate, in so repressive an autocracy as the ayatollah's, the truth and nature not merely of the government's pronouncements but also of cinematic art, of the very act of aesthetic creation or reportorial chronicling on film.

*The Apple* (1998) was one Iranian children's film to come my way in the spring of 1999, before the summer crackdown on student demonstrators in the streets of Tehran—which nearly spelled trouble for the (already limited) artistic freedom of the country's moviemakers as well. Only eighty-six minutes in length, this picture was made by Samira Makhmalbaf, the daughter of Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who was the scenarist as well as editor of the movie. Like Kiarostami's *Close-Up* (1990), *The Apple* metafictionally features the actual members of the family whose disturbingly true story is at its center. They are the Naderis: sixty-five-year-old Ghorbanali, the father; Soghra, his blind wife; and their twelve-year-old twin daughters, Zahra and Massoumeh. These girls were virtually imprisoned by their father in their Tehran home, away from sunlight, for all of their first twelve years, which means that they cannot speak their native Farsi (although they can make sounds), they walk in an ungainly manner, do not bathe, and possess the ironic gestural tic of a literally wagging tongue. As you might guess, Zahra and Massoumeh have never attended school and know no children other than each other.

One thinks immediately in this context of Truffaut's *Wild Child* (1969) and Herzog's *Mystery of Kaspar Hauser* (1975), except that in *The Apple* there



is no real mystery behind the twins' confinement. Their father, a religious man who makes his living by offering up prayers for others, reveals that he has kept his daughters locked up because their blind mother could not look after them, and he was afraid he might be dishonored if they were to come into physical contact with any of the neighborhood boys. The film begins when residents of this neighborhood in Tehran (known as Valiasr) petition the local government to intervene on Zahra and Massoumeh's behalf. Or, more precisely, *The Apple* begins with a beautiful image of poetic clarity (an image repeated at least twice): the arm of one of the girls stretches out as far as it can, through the bars of the gate that restricts her and into the cinematographic frame, to pour water from a cup onto a scruffy, potted, flowering plant. Water, naturally, is what Zahra and Massoumeh require, figuratively as well as literally, if *they* are to grow, for they are not (or need not be), as their father benightedly believes, flowers who will automatically wilt in the sun of men's azes.



**60. *The Apple* (1998), dir. Samira Makhmalbaf**

Water is what the twins get when, as a result of the complaint against Ghorbanali Naderi, they are removed from his home by child-welfare authorities for a good scrubbing in addition to a short hair-cut. Zahra and Massoumeh are

returned to their father after he promises not to keep them locked up anymore, but Ghorbanali immediately breaks his promise by secreting the girls once again: inside the Naderis' sparse, dimly lit home with their sightless mother. Instead of a front door, this townhouse of sorts has a front gate that looks out onto a small courtyard that itself is gated, and we watch the father methodically unlocking and locking these gates as he comes and goes for work, food, and ice. Mind you, Ghorbanali is not overtly cruel or hateful toward his daughters, just obtusely, suffocatingly protective; and they, for their part, are anything but hostile toward him and their mother. Indeed, Zahra and Massoumeh do not seem unhappy, for they know no alternative to the life they are living

They do, however, seem unconsciously attracted to sounds or images of growth and renewal: a baby crying across the alley; the plant inside their courtyard, whose flowers they attempt to replicate by splattering muddy handprints on a wall; a boy selling ice cream on the street; a woman washing clothes on her balcony next door. When the twins are finally freed from their domestic dungeon by Azizeh Mohamadi, a social worker (who, like the Naderi family, plays herself) dispatched to hold Ghorbanali to his promise, the first action they pleasureably take is to look into a mirror given to them by Mrs. Mohamadi, followed by their amused splashing of water onto their visages in that mirror. Literally and figuratively, the girls are seeing or identifying themselves for the very first time, which naturally is a prerequisite for their cognitive development. But the mirror is also a sly reminder here of the nature of filmic illusion, a clever reference to the (distortive?) mirror held up to nature—especially in a film whose performers reenact events from their own lives, or, as it were, mirror their private images and existences for all to see.

The result of Mrs. Mohamadi's visit to the Naderis is a reversal: not only does she set Zahra and Massoumeh free; she also locks their parents inside their own house, even as they did their children, and gives the uncomprehending girls the key. Next the social worker borrows a hacksaw from a neighbor and hands it to Ghorbanali with the warning that, if he does not saw through all the bars of the gate to his home, she will return to take his daughters away from him permanently. Meanwhile, as their humbled father saws and their enraged mother complains, Zahra and Massoumeh go out, after some home bound hesitation, to meet the world in the form of other children. Most important among them is a boy with a long fishing pole, at the end of whose line is attached an apple. He dangles it from the window of an apartment building, the twins try but fail to grab it, then the boy shows them where they can buy their own apples, which they do with money cadged from their now compliant father.



**61. *The Apple* (1998), dir. Samira Makhmalbaf**

Clearly the apple is meant to recall the Biblical temptation of Adam in the Garden of Eden. The difference, however, is that a boy is doing the tempting, not the female Eve, which means—aptly in as patriarchal society as Iran’s—that a male is responsible for the girls’ symbolic introduction to knowledge or consciousness, just as a male was responsible for their cloistering. And with such an introduction to “sin” comes the suggestion that the world holds perils as well as pleasures, exasperations as well as ecstasies, for Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi, while their cave at least offered the sameness of ironclad, perdurable security. So *The Apple* is no simple fable about the blessed civilizing of primitives; rather, it is a complex metaphor both for the inhumane repression of women in a theocratic state *and* for the merciful removal of those same women not simply from the pervasive precariousness of male-dominated or malevolent existence but also (through such concealing clothing as the *chador*) from the incessant glare of the male gaze.

The metaphor extends itself when, after purchasing some apples, the twins meet two uniformed schoolgirls on a playground. Massoumeh innocently smacks an apple against one girl’s face, then hands her the fruit. Baffled but beguiled by this attempt at communication, the girl kisses Massoumeh, who, interpreting the kiss as a reward for her aggression and not for the apple, strikes her new friend again. (This is neither the first nor the last of *The Apple*’s divinely comic moments.) After this incident, all four girls lie down on some rocks (yes, rocks) and eat the apples. Here, of course, it is one female who is “tempting” another, and here, also, temptation is associated both with pleasure (the kiss, the apple) and pain (the smack, the rocks), as it was for Adam and has been for everyone else ever since.



## 62. *The Apple* (1998), dir. Samira Makhmalbaf

As the girls leave the playground after eating their fruit, the talk—at least for the two who can talk—turns to watches and the telling of time, an appropriate subject given the symbolic import of apple-eating together with literal departure from the world of play. For time is a human construct primarily connected with the workaday world, which is the one Zahra and Massoumeh will eventually enter now that they have gained consciousness as well as liberation of the self, and which is where (at an open-air market) they find watches for sale. The twins want one, even though they may not know its function yet, and it is to their father that they turn again for the money. They find him at home, dutifully watched by Mrs. Mohamadi as he continues to saw through the bars of his house-gate. And, with the social worker's permission, Zahra and Massoumeh free Ghorbanali from *his* prison by unlocking the gate with his key.

The last time we see this man, he is on his way to the watchmaker's booth at the marketplace, escorted by his daughters and their two new friends. His wife remains behind, alone and bewildered, faceless beneath her *chador* as well as blind. Aptly if unwittingly, Soghra looks into her daughters' mirror, even as they had playfully put the same mirror up to their father's face. Then she walks through the open gates out into the street, calling for her girls but instead running into the apple—dangled by the same boy from the same apartment window. He teases Soghra with it but at last she is able to grab the fruit, at which point the frame freezes and *The Apple* ends. By now an otherwise meaningless cliché, the frozen frame here takes on poignant meaning, for it suggests that, frozen in space and time, the twins' mother can neither taste the fruit of knowledge nor escape the



glare of light, neither retreat to the safety of her grotto nor advance to the call of the wild.

Beyond the use of this frozen frame, *The Apple's* cinematography, by Ebrahim Ghafori and Mohamed Ahmadi, calls attention to itself by being of two distinct kinds: grainy, documentary-like, even blurred color footage, mostly for scenes at the child-welfare office, and smooth, devised, even warm images of muted browns and yellows tinged with turquoise for all other scenes, particularly those at the Naderi home. The turquoise naturally suggests the water—the fluid attention or liquid sustenance—that flowering plants, and blossoming girls, require to survive. But perhaps more interesting in this split between cinematographic styles is the suggestion of the turquoise-tinged scenes—compounded by the remoteness or distance of the camera during the documentary-like footage—that, however misguidedly raised by their parents, Zahra and Massoumeh still have and need those parents' love, even when these youngsters are finally left to their own devices in the streets, parks, and squares of Tehran. In other words, there is no slick, black-and-white opposition in *The Apple* between “good” authorities and “bad” fathers. Indeed, one could argue that Ghorbanali is the extreme, patriarchal product of the very system that now castigates his parental behavior. And when he laments to a neighbor “how hard it is to put back the pieces of a broken mirror,” this father more than implies that his familial mirror has been shattered as much by the (state-run) media's distorted, sensationalized coverage of his daughters' privation as by that privation itself.

But has that familial mirror ultimately been shattered, or has it instead merely been turned around to reflect the outside world as much as the interior one of the Naderi home? That is the question, and it is not easy to answer, for we cannot know what has become of the Naderi family, particularly of Zahra and Massoumeh, since *The Apple* was made. Certainly one can only wish them the growth and success enjoyed by the Iranian cinema itself ever since it emerged from the stultifying shadow of the imams and into the beaming light of the world screen—a growth and success apparently premised on the use of non-actors like the Naderis. Yet, if Iran is the home of today's one great national cinema, as a number of commentators have argued, how has it been able to achieve this status without the use of almost any professional actors?

Because, as Vernon Young argued years ago, “Film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film's total effect, unless they are grossly bad or overwhelmingly good” (582). Film criticism can so proceed because, in general in the cinema, theatrical performance, the acting of the words, is not the thing; more so than acting onstage, acting onfilm is part of a larger picture that depends for effect on its cinematographic rendering—on how it is photographed and edited and evenscored. (Although, paradoxically, a number of movies that depend on

non-actors, like *The Apple* and other examples from the Iranian cinema, use little or no music to buttress their performances.) And that larger picture includes the *faces* of actors, from which, without benefit of words, the camera can elicit character in a way that the stage obviously cannot (hence one of the beauties of silent film).

For an example of what I mean, watch the “performances” of Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi as themselves: they do not speak any words, but they move us by the pathetic beauty of their sweetly smiling presences, by the simple framing of that clumsy, youthful beauty as it shuffles through the Tehranian city scape of Samira and Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s narrative. Like the rest of the “cast,” the twins are neither overwhelmingly good nor grossly bad because they aren’t really acting, they’re *being*, and judgment of how good they are at being themselves is out of the question; each is allowing the camera to penetrate into the essence of her reality rather than presenting to that camera a reality framed by words. Perhaps the example of their father would be even better: in spite of his role as his daughters’ jailer, despite his whining defense of his behavior toward them, and despite his sudden sheepishness in the face of the social worker’s easy imperiousness, Ghorbanali appears to the camera-eye as a kindly, well-meaning if injudicious man. Which is exactly what he is.

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## Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's *Rosetta*

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Jean-Pierre Dardenne trained as an actor and his younger brother, Luc, studied philosophy; but they have dedicated themselves to filmmaking since the 1970s. After earning a reputation in their native Belgium for directing socially and politically conscious documentaries, they directed their first fiction feature, *Falsch*, in 1986. They have also been active as producers and in 1975 founded Dérives, a company with more than sixty documentaries to its credit. A second company, Les Films du Fleuve, was formed by the Dardennes in 1994. The brothers hail from Wallonia, the southern, French-speaking region of Belgium that provides the gritty, postindustrial landscape so omnipresent in their films.

In the decade since their third fiction feature, *La Promesse* (1996), became an international success, the unassuming but highly determined Dardennes have ascended to the forefront of a newly revived socially-conscious European cinema. At a time when filmmaking in Europe, however distinguished, seemed largely unmoored from the social changes wrought by the end of the Soviet empire, *La Promesse* offered a modest but profound view of illegal immigration and worker exploitation, anchored in the moral complexities of the relationship between a Belgian contractor and his teenaged son. Two prizes at Cannes (the Palme d'Or and Best Actress) for *Rosetta* (1999)—which conveys the obsessive extent to which a teenaged girl demands a job, a home, and a normal life—consecrated the Dardenne brothers as leading international cineastes.

*Rosetta* was followed by four similarly socially realistic films that are, at the same time, intimate character portraits: *The Son* (2002), *L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005), *The Silence of Lorna* (2008), and *The Kid with a Bike* (2011). In *The Son*, the father of a dead son must learn how to father the delinquent who killed his own child. In *L'Enfant*, the young father of a newborn son with his girlfriend sells the baby to a criminal adoption ring—only to relent and retrieve the child, thereby placing himself in debt toward, and danger from, his criminal confederates. (At Cannes, *L'Enfant* was awarded the Palme d'Or, marking the fourth time that a filmmaker—or filmmakers in the Dardennes' case—has won the festival's top prize twice. The previous two-time winners are Bille August, Francis Ford Coppola, and Emir Kusturica.) *The Silence of Lorna* revolves around the machinations forced on illegal immigrants attempting to grab a morsel of the world's wealth—in this case through fake marriages, and even murder, for citizenship. And in *The Kid with a*

*Bike*, we return to fathers and sons, as a seven-year-old boy's longing for his father—who has abandoned him to a Belgian orphan asylum—proves itself to be stronger than his father's rejection.

In each of their six feature films from 1996 to 2011, the Dardennes' rigorous handheld camerawork and highly selective framing merge with physically intense acting (often by nonprofessionals or virtual unknowns) to evoke a realistic tradition infused with philosophical and spiritual depth—one that hearkens back to both Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero* (1947) and Bresson's *Pickpocket* (1959). Realistically, even naturalistically shot, impeccably constructed, ethically uncompromising, and emotionally searing, the Dardenne brothers' films give voice to a population often despised or ignored: illegal aliens, shameless slumlords, corrupt officials, small time criminals; and they invariably center on the world of work, in the lowly precincts of illegal construction labor, in demeaning entry-level clerical jobs, or in subsistence-pay apprentice training. To such characters the brothers bring a compassionate view born of the understanding that this under class has, in part, been created by society's higher-ups. These are figures of limited material and social means who, under the most dire circumstances, must grapple with life-and-death decisions. And the films that feature them suggest an ingrained Christian vision through insisting on the transformative possibility of the most debased being.

The power of *La Promesse*, *Rosetta*, *The Son*, *L'Enfant*, *The Silence of Lorna*, and *The Kid with a Bike*, however, lies in the end in the spontaneous edginess of each scene in any of these films, the frenetic energy of characters as they confront each other through physical and verbal assault. Indeed, the Dardenne brothers reinvent the notion of character so that we are not among stereotypes of the downtrodden: we are with fumbling, faulty human beings who are trying to survive as best as they can. Rather than confronting notions of good and evil in such works, we get a sense of lost and found. What we have here, in sum, is a new formula for storytelling, with unadorned subjects, unaffected cinematography, and only, in the brothers' words, "the music of the street"—a formula which, while recalling Italian neorealism, is its inverse in the sense that the Dardennes' films contain no explicit critique of "society." Their pictures are finally a search to acquire dignity, to achieve redemption, for oneself as well as for others—perhaps no more so than in *Rosetta*, which I propose to discuss here.



**63. *Rosetta* (1999), dir. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne**

*Rosetta* won the Palme d'Or at the 1999 Cannes Film Festival over David Lynch's *The Straight Story*, and I suspect that the American entry lost not only because of the increasingly virulent anti-Americanism of the French, but also because of this picture's unashamedly Christian overtones in an era unparalleled for its greedy secularism. But *Rosetta* has its Christian overtones as well, though they have been missed by every commentator I have read, probably because of the movie's seemingly unrelieved bleakness of tone. Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne themselves have not helped their cause by comparing *Rosetta* to the modernist hero of Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), a land surveyor called "K.," who tries in vain to be recognized by the very officials who supposedly have summoned him to their village (which is overlooked by a castle on a hill).

She has more in common, however, with Bresson's protagonists than with Kafka's "K"—in particular with the late, great French filmmaker's Mouchette and Balthazar. Their parables represent a departure from the Christian certitude to be found in such earlier works by Bresson as *Diary of a Country Priest* (1950), *A Man Escaped* (1956), *Pickpocket*, and *The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962); still, a principle of redemption or a promise of transfiguration operates in *Mouchette* (1966) and *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966) as well, even if it may be found only in a humanity or an animality redeemed from this earth. Both these pictures are linked with *Rosetta* in their examination of the casual, gratuitous inhumanity to which the meek of this earth are subjected, a fourteen-year-old girl in the former case and a donkey in the latter.

Mouchette is the loveless, abused, humiliated daughter of an alcoholic father and a dying mother, living in a northern France made to seem unreal by the juxtaposition of village life from another century with the modernity of jazz and automobiles. So relentlessly oppressive is Mouchette's young existence that she finally drowns herself—to the accompaniment of Monteverdi's *Magnificat*, which is Bresson's way of indicating that death alone is victory over such a spiritually wasted life. Balthazar, by contrast, begins his life as a child's pet who is formally christened, virtually worshipped like a pagan idol, and generously adorned with flowers. But the world of hard labor brutally intrudes: Balthazar is beaten and broken in; becomes a circus attraction; gets worked almost to death grinding corn for an old miser; then is hailed as a saint and walks in a church procession after his rescue, only to be shot to death by a customs officer during a smuggling escapade. The donkey's only saving grace, in a bizarre world of leather-clad motorcyclists and rough hewn millers, is that he is allowed to die on a majestic mountainside amid a flock of peacefully grazing sheep.

I have summarized *Mouchette* and *Au hasard, Balthazar* in some detail because I believe that the Dardenne brothers know both these films as well as the religious tradition, or spiritual style, of which they partake—one dominated by French Catholics even subsequent to Bresson, in such pictures as Cavalier's *Thérèse* (1986), Pialat's *Under the Sun of Satan* (1987), Rohmer's *A Tale of Winter* (1992), and Doillon's *Ponette* (1996). Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne happen to be Belgian, not French, and prior to *Rosetta* they spent twenty years making sociopolitical documentaries for European television before turning to fiction film in the socially realistic *La Promesse* (1996). That fine and unforgettable work burrowed into a rough chunk of proletarian life in Liège today, an economically deterministic environment in which the struggle to survive leads, ravenously, to the exploitation of workers by other workers. Into this pit of money-grubbing vipers came an African family that showed a morally degraded, teenaged Belgian boy—simply through their dignity and pride—that another kind of existence is possible, even in the muck. We are in the heavily industrialized city of Liège again in *Rosetta*, and again we are dealing with a Belgian teenager, this time a girl. But in their second feature film the Dardennes (who write their own screenplays) not only forsake this world of proletarian realism for the nether one of sub proletarian naturalism; at the same time, paradoxically, they seem to invoke an otherworldly realm that, unbeknownst to *Rosetta* (or anyone else in the picture, for that matter), runs parallel to her own.

Living in a tiny, beat-up trailer (sans toilet or running water) with her alcoholic, irresponsible, utterly dispirited mother, who mends old clothes for peddling in second-hand shops when she is not turning tricks in exchange for drinks, eighteen-year-old *Rosetta* is a furiously sullen bundle of energy. This adolescent longs to

have a “normal” life—which for her means having a “real” job—and to become a productive member of society, but even this modest goal appears to be beyond her grasp. (Hence her identity is as a member of the *lumpen proletariat*, or proles who have not had mechanized or otherwise rote work long enough to be dehumanized by it.) As we see at the film’s outset, Rosetta must be bodily removed from a factory where she has just been fired, for reasons unspecified. Subsisting in existential *angst*, quietly terrified that she will slide into the abyss like her bedraggled mother, the fresh-faced daughter wages a desperate, purely instinctive battle to lift herself out of her wretched, nearly feral existence and achieve a material state of grace.



**64. *Rosetta* (1999), dir. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne**

Like some form of brute life force, the barely socialized Rosetta will do anything but beg to survive; like a jackal (as opposed to Balthazar, a passive pack animal), she will nip at any chance to prolong her life—including poach fish with rudimentary tackle from a pond so dank and muddy that it could be called a swamp. Indeed, this movie makes a spectacle of Rosetta’s repeated dodging across a highway and ducking into the woods that adjoin her trailer park: as quick and cunning as an animal, she scrambles for her life, then covers her tracks, hides her things, and hoards her food (sometimes outside, where she would rather compete with the foxes for it than with her shiftless mother). Ever walking briskly when she is not actually running, Rosetta appears to compensate for the paralyzing, anomic dread of her implacable existence with a defiant, headlong tread.





**65. *Rosetta* (1999), dir. Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne**

Determined to find regular work after being fired from the factory job—and equally determined not to go on welfare—Rosetta applies for several menial vacancies without success before landing a position at a waffle stand. There she replaces a young woman whose sick baby caused her to miss ten days of work in one month, and there she meets Riquet, a young man from the countryside who ekes out his own pittance at the waffle stand while secretly skimming profits from his boss. (This taskmaster runs a number of such stands throughout Liège, and is played by the voracious Olivier Gourmet, the father in *La Promesse*.) Delicately performed by Fabrizio Rongione, Riquet is the only person in the film to show Rosetta any kind of sympathy, and the two develop a tentative friendship—though his awkward attempts to gain her romantic interest go completely unacknowledged by the preoccupied girl. During one such poignant try at Riquet’s crude apartment (which appears to be carved out of a warehouse), he treats Rosetta to a dinner of beer and fried bread, stands on his head, then plays a tape of himself amateurishly banging on a set of drums (the only “music” we hear during the movie, since the Dardennes wisely eschew the adornment of a musical soundtrack in *Rosetta*, as in their films generally) and tries to teach her to dance. She remains unresponsive, however, especially because of an attack of stomach pain, one of several such (unexplained) attacks that recur throughout the film. But she does ask to sleep at Riquet’s place, just to get away from her mother for a night—which she does, in her own bedroll, untouched by her understanding host.

Before falling asleep, Rosetta utters in voice-over (even as we see her on screen) the following mantra of reassurance, words that at the same time painfully attest to the degree of her alienation from a self that she has nearly objectified in an effort to steel her humanity against the world’s cruel indifference: “Your name is Rosetta.



My name is Rosetta. You've found a job. I've found a job. You have a friend. I have a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won't fall into the rut. I won't fall into the rut." To indicate the relative normality that Rosetta has achieved, the Dardennes film most of this scene at Riquet's apartment in a static, becalming long take, with the camera in medium shot. Much of the rest of *Rosetta*, by contrast, is photographed with a handheld camera that remains disorientingly close to the heroine as she dashes about, with a twofold effect. On the one hand, the restless, uneven camerawork of Alain Marcoen (the Dardennes' regular cinematographer) creates the visual equivalent of the instability and uncertainty in Rosetta's life; on the other hand, the handheld camera seems to dog Rosetta with an angry intensity that matches her own, as it were her *doppelgänger*-cum-guardian angel or, antithetically, the devil of destiny in disguise.

The jagged, hurtling camera immediately resumes its ways in the scene following Rosetta's sleep-over at Riquet's, where she is fired from the waffle stand after being on the job for only three days. (She is replaced by the boss's son despite her efficiency, and despite the fact that this girl has never seemed happier—and therefore more personable—than when she has been serving up waffles.) So desperate is she not to "fall into the rut" which now gapes wide open before her, that, after she is terminated, the raging teenager pathetically clings to a heavy sack of flour as though it were simultaneously a life raft and the anchor preventing her forcible removal from a life-giving ocean of work. Rosetta possessed no such lifeline when, earlier, she and her estranged mother had become embroiled in a fight along the shore of the turbid, stagnant pond near the trailer camp (ironically named "Grand Canyon," by the way), at the end of which the older woman tossed her daughter into a moat so thick with mud that the youth could barely pull herself out of it. Down into the metaphorical abyss she went—appropriately, at her mother's hands—and down there, in the hellishness of high water, she almost suffocated.

Riquet nearly succumbs to the pond as well when, subsequent to Rosetta's dismissal from the waffle stand, he finds her fishing, tries to help, and accidentally falls in. So intent is this girl on not going down with him—literally or figuratively—that she nearly lets her only friend drown. But she relents and saves him at the last minute, only to get Riquet's treasured job through another means: by blowing the whistle on his scam at the waffle stand (which she has long since detected and a share of which he had even offered to her, albeit unsuccessfully), after which the boss instantly installs Rosetta in the stunned boy's place. Again, however, she does not remain on the job for long, except that this time the working girl terminates herself: in part because Riquet's physical as well as mental harassment, in the wake of his own dismissal, has awakened her moral conscience; in part because Rosetta is tired of fending for her drunken mother in addition to herself, and for this reason has decided to quit not only work but also life.

This she plans to do by turning on the propane gas in the house trailer she has made airtight—gas that will dispatch her passed-out mother along with her—but the canister runs out before the job is done. So Rosetta must go to buy another one from the seedy, opportunistic caretaker of the trailer court. As she struggles to carry the extremely heavy new canister back to the trailer—for this young woman, even committing suicide will be hard work—Riquet arrives on his scooter for one more episode of harassment. But he senses that something is terribly wrong when Rosetta drops to the ground in tears; he gets off his motorbike, goes over to the fallen girl, and compassionately lifts her up; they look silently into each other's eyes for a moment, after which the camera switches to a held shot of Rosetta's face in medium close-up; then the film abruptly ends with a quick cut to black.

That *Rosetta* has Christian overtones should be evident from this final scene, as well as from the titular character's one outfit of clothing, her recurrent stomach pain, and the food she eats. This pain, like the stomach cancer of Bresson's protagonist in *Diary of a Country Priest*, is meant to reflect not only the physical stress of Rosetta's impoverished life but also its spiritual dilemma. That she can get relief from her pain only by turning a blow-dryer on her abdomen ought to tell us that human warmth, or fellow-feeling, is missing from her life as well. And that human warmth comes to this latter-day Every woman, as a miraculous godsend, in the form of Riquet, who in several scenes pursues her as inexorably with his scooter as the Dardennes do throughout with their camera; and who more than once wrestles with Rosetta as he were struggling, like a saintly figure from a medieval religious drama, for the possession or salvation of her soul.

Rosetta's habitual costume itself underscores her near-medieval existence, foraging for sustenance in the wilds of the postmodern Western European economy. Though her facial mask is expressionless, she dresses in a jumbled garb of red-and-black jacket, thick yellow tights, gray skirt, and rubber boots—in other words, in a kind of fool's motley that vividly stands out against the sparse and somber, cool and wet winter landscape of Belgium. This is initially no wise fool, however, for all her survivalist cunning; Rosetta gets her otherworldly wisdom, emotional lift, or spiritual resurrection from none other than the sad-eyed, drably dressed, otherwise corporeal Riquet, who, in a reversal of gender roles, plays the Columbine to her Harlequin (or who, as a former gymnast, represents the accomplished acrobat and dancer in Harlequin to Rosetta's wily if dense servant). And that resurrection, that uplift, comes at the end of Rosetta's own *via dolorosa*, during which, like Christ carrying his wooden cross, she stumbles three times with her canister of propane gas. She has finally exchanged her material state of grace, however minimal, for grace of another kind, and the implication is that Rosetta had to forgo the body before she could bare her soul—a body that we have seen her nourish only with fish (the traditional symbol of Christ), bread, waffles (whose cognate term is the [Eucharistic] wafer), and, near the very end, a revivifying hard-boiled egg.

Those who have argued that *Rosetta*'s tone is unvaried in its grimness—that this girl is trapped throughout and the Dardenne brothers' film is merely a documentary-like chronicle of her depressing case—choose to ignore this work's spiritual element, in addition to the fact that, unlike Bresson's *Mouchette* or Balthazar, *Rosetta* is alive and in good company at the conclusion. Put another way, there is a mite of hope for this young heroine, and it comes from another person, from the human spirit of Riquet. This hope does not derive from the redemption of physical reality, from the uniting of *Rosetta* with natural elements in space as a way of creating for her a supernal warp in time, as it would if *Rosetta* had been shot in realistic-cum-transcendental style (like *The Straight Story*). *Rosetta*'s sphere is circumscribed, as the handheld camerawork (with almost no room for establishing shots, panoramic vistas, or “dead time” spent dwelling on the phenomenal world that surrounds her) reveals, and the only way to reach her is by force, as Riquet learns.

As *Rosetta*, Émilie Dequenne (Best Actress at Cannes) is so thoroughly immersed in her otherwise unappealing (and most unglamorous) character's simmering fierceness—so free of the self-regard that can tinge even the best actors' work—that, by sheer force of will, she forces us to pay attention to *Rosetta*'s appalling life in all its squalor. Hence there was an extra-aesthetic pleasure in wondering what Dequenne herself is like and *was* like between takes during the shooting of *Rosetta*, so extreme is the role into which she has plunged herself. There was another kind of pleasure, too—one as damning as it is astonishing. That is the pleasure we take in paying rapt attention to, and thinking a lot about, characters and subjects in film (in theatre and fiction as well, but especially in cinema, the most wide-reaching and therefore the most democratic of arts) to which we would not normally give a large amount of consideration in real life. This, of course, is the special, intriguing power that all art holds over us: the power to engage merely by the act of isolating and framing. I bring it up in the context of *Rosetta* only because it is more pronounced in the realistic or naturalistic mode than in any other. And because such a mode, when combined with a spiritual or a transcendental style, has the power to exalt like no other mode: to shift our concern, to elevate our solicitude, from self to other, from man to God and thus to other men. Outstanding among them must be counted the wretched of the earth, the Rosettas of this world who race through their time here because they mortally fear to idle.

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## Zhang Yimou's *The Road Home*

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Zhang Yimou is the most prominent member of the first generation of China's filmmakers since the pre-Communist era (even as Kiarostami is the most prominent post-revolutionary filmmaker of the Iranian New Wave)—the so-called Fifth Generation—to make movies that do not automatically toe a socialist-realist line, that do not spew out Party propaganda as a matter of course. These directors, graduates of China's only film school, the Beijing Film Academy, began work in the mid-1980s and have produced a spate of notable features.

Moreover, for several of these pictures Zhang served as either the cinematographer or the leading actor: most notably, for Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984), the film that first put China's Fifth Generation on international screens (where it garnered massive praise for cinematographer Zhang's distinctive visual style), in the same way that Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987) first brought the Iranian New Wave to international attention. Zhang also worked on such Fifth-Generation films as Chen's *The Big Parade* (1985), Zhang Junzhao's *The One and the Eight* (1984), Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (1987) and *Li Lianying* (1990), Li Shaohong's *Bloody Dawn* (1990), and Zhou Xiaowen's *Black Mountain Road* (1991).

But Zhang's work as a director, although it conveys an ecstatic awareness of the natural world similar to that of Abbas Kiarostami (with whom he shares an interest in photography), is less austere, less oblique, and more emotionally direct than that of the Iranian master. And Zhang's films themselves, unlike Kiarostami's in Iran, have not always been able to escape China's sociopolitical strictures. His initial directorial effort, *Red Sorghum* (1987), was fortunate enough to be a beneficiary of China's first open-door policy since the launching of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, achieving international distribution (and with it the Golden Bear Award at the 1988 Berlin Film Festival) as well as wide release in its native land. However, Zhang's second and third pictures to be shown outside China, *Ju Dou* (1990) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)—which were produced by the Japanese and Taiwanese respectively—were originally forbidden release to the Chinese public.

Why? At least in part because each work was nominated for an Oscar as best foreign-language movie and each was the winner of a prize at a major Western film festival. (*Ju Dou*, the first Chinese film ever to be nominated for an Oscar as best foreign-language picture, was the winner of the Luis Buñuel Award at Cannes, while *Raise the Red Lantern* won both the Silver Lion and the International Critics' Prize at the Venice Festival.) What surer sign that these motion pictures espouse bourgeois liberal values, to be seen in their flouting of sexual norms that define the institution of marriage, their harrowing portrait of the systematic oppression of women, and their allegorical implication that young Chinese should rebel against the brutal, autocratic rule of impotent old men? (In *Red Sorghum*, by contrast, a

man recalls his grandparents' bucolic love affair during the 1920s, then their heroic display of peasant vitality as, side by side, they fight against the invading Japanese in 1937.)

All of Zhang's work considered here—work that is visually stunning (as previously noted, Zhang was a photographer before he became a cinematographer and then a director)—is drawn from contemporary Chinese fiction set in the 1920s or 1930s; all of it features the at once subtle and supple, sensible and sensual Gong Li in the leading female roles; and all of it treats the struggle of young women against patriarchally defined circumstances—specifically, against arranged marriages. In *Red Sorghum*, that marriage is to a much older and even leperous man who owns a winery; in *Ju Dou*, it is to the vile, old owner of a dye factory who has tortured to death his two previous wives for not bearing him a son; and in *Raise the Red Lantern*, it is to a wealthy older man who already has three wives and who has hanged other wives of his in the past for their infidelities. Watchdogs of gerontocratic privilege, these male elders could be called.

The real-life watchdogs of gerontocratic privilege themselves caused trouble for Zhang when he made *To Live* (1994): this picture in fact was banned in its country of origin because of its purportedly negative portrayal of historical events as they affect a single family over the turbulent decades from the Communist Civil War to the "Great Leap Forward" to the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, Zhang was forced to write an apology for wanting to promote *To Live* at the Cannes Festival. So, in *Not One Less* (1999) and *The Road Home* (2000), this director abandoned the historical epic for a subject less fraught with political overtones, and one that he had first explored in *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992).

That subject is the heroic obstinacy of peasant women who, against overwhelming odds and with almost comical determination, succeed in bending the world (one that juxtaposes the countryside against the big city) to their own will. (We see the obverse of this theme in Zhang's *Shanghai Triad* [1995], a gangster movie where the country girl is corrupted by her life in pre-revolutionary, mob-ruled Shanghai, as well as by a cruelly domineering patriarch of the kind found in *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*.) Though *Not One Less* and *The Road Home* were made seven to eight years after *The Story of Qiu Ju*, these three films nonetheless form a loose trilogy on the theme of sheer stubbornness, celebrating human beings' excessive, literal-minded devotion to principles that, at first glance, seem to be trivial or absurd.

In *The Story of Qiu Ju* (based on a novella called *The Wan Family's Lawsuit*, by Chen Yuan Bin), the seven-months-pregnant heroine demands satisfaction from bureaucrats at several levels after her husband is kicked in the groin during a quarrel with the political chief of their village. The wife's wearying journeys back and forth from village to various towns to a bustling modern city, and her unwearied patience with recalcitrant officials in cold offices or dusty anterooms, are, by any



rational standard, far out of proportion to the substance of her complaint. And before this film is at the halfway point, its heroine has us chuckling at her terrier grip on the trouser-leg of Communist authority, more concerned about her husband's cause than he himself is. Yet her refusal to accept a reasonable standard—pushing the demand for satisfaction to the point of monomania (particularly on the part of a woman living in a nation where female infanticide is practiced, even more in the countryside than in urban areas)—is, in Zhang Yimou's cinematic universe, an ethical as well as a political imperative.

This imperative, however, can also turn into an impulse that proceeds from selfishness, suspicion, and disrespect for authority, as well as sheer ignorance about the workings of the modern world. Thus when she is first hired, the substitute teacher in *Not One Less*—a thirteen-year-old girl no bigger or smarter than her unruly pupils—is told that she will forfeit her cash bonus if any of the children drop out of school. When one girl is recruited by an elite training program for athletes, a great source of pride to the village, the teacher is furious. She tries to hide the girl, then chases after the car that has come to take her away. When another student, the class clown, is forced by his debt-ridden family's poverty to seek work in the big city—where instead he ends up begging and stealing in order to survive—his teacher struggles to earn enough money to pay her own expenses as she goes after him. Both too thickheaded to grasp the inevitability of failure *and* worried more about her bonus than her missing pupil, this adolescent must bribe children to help her search for the delinquent boy, whom she ultimately does succeed in finding.

Everyone in *Not One Less*, then, thinks of himself or herself first, demanding a cash reward for any effort put forward. And, in this sense, the film seemed to express Zhang's concern over the dehumanizing impact of capitalist practices on Communist China, or to portray the conflict between his country's socialist humanism and the competitiveness-verging-on-exploitation of the market economy it had imported. Not by chance, *Not One Less* was reportedly the first Zhang Yimou picture to please Chinese government censors, although in the West many derided its critique of capitalism as socialist nostalgia bordering on propaganda. *The Road Home* (with a screenplay by Bao Shi, adapted from his 1999 novel *Remembrance*) shares concerns similar to those Zhang expressed in *Not One Less*, though it is less strident—and more sentimental—in conveying them. I should now like to treat this film in detail.

*The Road Home* revisits the era of the “Great Leap Forward” (beginning in 1958 and followed by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966, when Zhang himself was just sixteen yet had his urban education interrupted for life, work, and “re-education” on a farm) via a framing, and parallel, story in the present of the late 1990s. The film begins in that present with a successful businessman in his late thirties, named Luo Yusheng, returning by sport-utility vehicle from the

city where he lives (East Gate) to his native village of Sanhetun in northern China. His father, Luo Changyu, has died, and Yusheng (an only child) is going home for the funeral as well as to comfort his grief-stricken mother, Zhao Di. She is weaving the funeral cloth to cover her husband's coffin, and she insists, as age-old custom dictates, that his coffin be carried by hand—not transported by truck—from the hospital where the old man died to the village where he lived. Thus will Luo Changyu never forget the road home—the very same road Di had chased him down, during their courtship, so long ago.

But such a custom will be difficult to obey, for in this instance it requires around thirty-five men working in shifts over a two-day period in the middle of a harsh winter. And there are not enough such men—young ones—to be found in Sanhetun, which, with their newfound economic freedom, they, like Yusheng, have departed to work in the rapidly expanding urban areas of China. Contemporary China, it seems, has no time or inclination for this funereal custom or other practices like it. More importantly, Zhao Di's intransigence over the matter of her dead husband's transport is less an instance of an ill-tempered old woman's incessant nagging than of an elderly lady's noble reassertion of spiritual values that have been allowed to deteriorate in the decades between her marriage and her widowhood.

Even her son tries to convince Di that a traditional funeral procession would be impractical, if not impossible, these days. And Yusheng's point of view is understandable given this urban professional's long absence from his rural home, together with the fact that he has been too busy working in an office to experience romance (let alone of the kind his mother did), or to find a mate of his own. While the matter of the deceased Luo Changyu's transportation is being mooted by his family and village officials, *The Road Home* moves back in time, to 1958, to its major subject: the meeting, wooing, and ultimate marrying of Luo Changyu and Zhao Di. This story, of course, was originally told by Di but is remembered here by Yusheng (whom we occasionally hear in first-person voiceover, narrating the transitions between sequences or episodes from the past).

Reversing the Hollywood convention that looks back at the faded past from the vivid present, *The Road Home* takes us from a dreary, bluish gray modernity drained of contrast and beauty and photographed mostly from static viewpoints, into a bygone era radiating with lush, textured color and filmed with sweeping camera movements. (The cinematographer was Hou Yong.) Ironically, the present, with its desaturated photography, grief, funeral arrangements, and blizzards, is more alienating and less immediate than the past, which is suffused with the warmth of young love and marked by a cascade of lovely seasonal images from the natural world. And while the grim burial preparations are presented with bleak, documentary-like detachment, the blooming love affair between twenty-year-old Luo Changyu and eighteen-year-old Zhao Di is characterized by subjective points

of view or camera placements that position the spectator himself as a participant in the roance.



**66. *The Road Home* (2000), dir. Zhang Yimou**

But Zhang is not romanticizing the past merely for the sake of such romanticization: you can find that in James Cameron's 1997 movie *Titanic* (more on which later). He frames *The Road Home* in such a way as to articulate his, and presumably many of his countrymen's, nostalgia for a *socialist* past characterized by rustic innocence, pastoral romance, and collective altruism—in distinct contrast with the world-weariness, isolation or atomization, and self-interest of life in the commerce-driven, job-oriented city centers of today's China. It certainly is no accident that Yusheng's father was the village *teacher*, and that the older man journeyed from the city to out-of-the-way Sanhetun to pursue his humanistic vocation. Yusheng, by contrast, although educated to be a teacher and eventually to take his father's place, left Sanhetun for the city and its promise of ample economic opportunity (even as the teenaged teacher in *Not One Less* tries to turn her position itself into an economic opportunity—and finds her students leaving her for the wider world and economic opportunities of their own). The son's own "road home" leads back to a Sanhetun whose old schoolhouse is now badly in need of repair, if not complete restoration, and whose few children have no one left to teach them.

That schoolhouse, naturally, becomes the centerpiece of Yusheng's flashback, for it is being built (in a communal effort by the men of the village) in preparation for the arrival of the new teacher, Luo Changyu, a handsome young man who

immediately catches the eye of beautiful young Zhao Di. Falling absolutely in love at absolute first sight, the youthful Di pursues her man with an unbound determination equaled only by the same kind her older self exhibits, in the present, in pursuit of the customary funeral cortege for her late husband. Di's romantic persistence is noteworthy not only because of the differences in status, background, and education (she was and remains illiterate) between her and Luo Changyu. That persistence is also remarkable because she is breaking with the cultural tradition of arranged marriages and attempting—against her blind, widowed mother's better judgment—to choose her own mate (having already rejected several “approved” marriage proposals from men she did not love). As Luo Yusheng reveals in voiceover, “This was a first for our village: the freedom of falling in love”—a personal freedom that links Zhao Di to an aspect of the modern of which Zhang Yimou ostensibly approves.

That Zhang knows that, in the West, the issue of arranged or forbidden marriages was treated much earlier than in China—in life if not in art—is evidenced by something we see on the walls of the elderly Zhao Di's home: two posters advertising the Chinese release of Cameron's *Titanic*. This American movie obviously represents the kind of overblown, omnivorous spectacle that Zhang once stubbornly opposed. Yet there is also a curious and unmistakable affinity between *The Road Home* and *Titanic*, each of which is built around the image of an old woman reminiscing about the great, convention-defying love of her youth—a love that future generations will contemplate with wonder and longing.

Aside from the outline of their plots, however, these two films share another affinity: their musical soundtracks. San Bao's over-orchestrated, relentlessly schmaltzy score shamelessly imitates James Horner's quieter theme music for *Titanic* and nudges *The Road Home* toward an emotional grandiosity that its delicate carriage cannot bear. Cameron's picture was the kind of big-budget production that could use such music (to see *Titanic* without it, as I have done, is to realize how much the movie leans on its music, as opposed to its action and acting, for dramatic and emotional effect); but Zhang's film is smaller, in the best sense of the word, and therefore calls for a far less intrusive, sentiment-indicating score.

To wit: the road home leads to a tiny, depopulated village in a remote area of northern China, not to a titanic vessel crossing the Atlantic Ocean with a passenger list of international proportions. Yet in the story of this small Chinese village, universal themes will be recognized: a child's responsibility to his or her parents (Yusheng's coming home to bury his father and honor his mother; Zhao Di's inheriting of her mother's sense of tradition at the same time as she goes against it in arranging her own marriage); the veneration (often unaccompanied by substantial remuneration) that societies feel for education and educators; and the idea of pure, perfect, and spontaneous as well as never-ending love. *Idea* it is in

*The Road Home*, for the emotions felt by Di and Changyu are the kind more often dreamt about than experienced in reality. Romantic fable though it may be, this film, in its approach to romance, is chaste indeed: there are no embraces, nor is there any kissing or touching, let alone nudity and fornication. Di and Changyu's love resides solely in their eyes, their hearts, their minds, their manner. And, of course, it rests in the actions they must take to realize that love.

Di takes the first step, undertaking to prepare a delicious dish each day for Changyu's mid-day meal as he works along with the other men of Sanhetun to complete the construction of the new schoolhouse. The trouble is, all the village girls are preparing dishes for the communal table at which the men share lunch, and it is difficult for Di to see who takes her offering, given that the young women must remain at a distance while the workers eat. This scene, repeated several times during the film, is carefully composed so that, as the men approach the table, one sees only their torsos and arms, which are covered in similar clothing whose dark colors blend together to make these workers look like a herd. Simultaneously, the sounds of the men's shuffling footsteps, mixed with the rattling of dishes, drown out any individual voices. Thus does Zhang visualize and articulate the communal or cooperative nature of this rural society—not to speak of the ethos behind Communism itself. At the same time, he poignantly shows one woman's strenuous effort to assert her individuality by finding, on her own, the man with whom she will spend the rest of *his* life—literally, in the sense that she outlives him, and figuratively, in the sense that, strong individual though she may be, life without marriage in this patriarchal society is unthinkable to an uneducated Di prepared only for work in the home.

Some of that work involves weaving at a loom, which Di also does while the villagers build the schoolhouse in which Changyu will spend his entire career as a primary-school teacher. She lovingly weaves the traditional, lucky red (as well as Communist red) banner to be wound around the building's rafters, and we know by the way Di is photographed at the loom—through the weft of the fabric she's weaving—that Zhang is suggesting a union between man and machine (epitomized by the word “handicraft”) which is anything but alienating, as it was in the pre-Communist world of *Ju Dou*. The fact that, in the present of 1998, she weaves her husband's funeral cloth at the same loom—but only after it has undergone extensive repair or restoration—is a comment not only about enduring love, craftsmanship, and folkways, but also about the *passing* of all three in a postmodern world preoccupied with the new, the fast, and the convenient.

Certainly there is nothing new, fast, or convenient about the way in which Di and Changyu formally meet for the first time. According to the village code, this new teacher must visit each home for a meal, and after a month in Sanhetun he arrives at Di's house for lunch—during which her mother does most of the talking. Before this meeting, Di had unabashedly gone out of her way to cross paths with

her beau-to-be: by drawing water from the old well that overlooks the schoolhouse from atop a hill, rather than from a newer one closer to her home; by waiting along the side of the road for Changyu and his students to pass after school lets out; and even by standing outside his classroom, if not to be seen by him, then at least to hear the sound of his mellifluous voice instructing the boys of Sanhetun village. At lunch Di and Changyu barely speak to each other, but their mutual admiration-cum-affection is clear from their smiles, their demeanors, and their plan to have additional meals together.



**67. *The Road Home* (2000), dir. Zhang Yimou**

Just as this couple's romance is beginning, however, Changyu is called back to the city because of ominous-sounding but never-specified "political trouble." All of China was in a state of political upheaval at this time—1958—as a result of the "Great Leap Forward," which was designed not only to revolutionize agricultural production by a mass mobilization of the countryside into "people's communes." (Ironically, given *The Road Home's* nostalgia for what we might call familial socialism, these communes would disrupt family living and loosen traditional family ties by freeing women from household chores and child care for the supposedly more edifying labor of the fields.) The "Great Leap Forward" was also intended to expand industry by *mechanizing* agriculture, another irony given *The Road Home's* seeming championing of bucolic primitivism.

But the "Great Leap Forward" itself is not Zhang's subject or, in any event, not a convenient one, so he reduces his film's potential political content to a background element. Changyu may get "broken" by Communist Party officials when they interrogate him in the city, but Zhang is more interested here in symbolically portraying Di's broken heart at her chosen man's sudden departure and delayed



return. She races across the countryside in an effort to catch up with Changyu's horse-drawn cart, say one last good-bye, and give him the mushroom dumplings she has made especially for him. But Di stumbles along the way, losing sight of the cart as it trundles down the road, almost losing the treasured hair clip Changyu recently gave her, and inadvertently breaking the china bowl from which he had previously eaten. It is Di's mother who pays an itinerant craftsman to painstakingly put this keepsake's pieces back together with metal staples—a process we watch as Hou Yong's camera naturally remains on the workman's hands. This repair-process signifies not only the gradual mending of a daughter's heart, but also one mother's change of heart as she now resolves to unite behind Di in her energetic quest to win Changyu's hand in marriage.

Of course we know in advance that, whatever the delays and frustrations, this matter is going to be resolved in the girl's favor. Still, for good measure, Bao Shi and Zhang throw in two “moments of final suspense,” one visualized and the other narrated. Against her mother's vigorous objections, Di decides to go by foot to the city to find Changyu when he does not come back after a month, as planned. But the winter weather literally stops her in her tracks, and we watch it do so, as she faints along the road—where this young woman would have died had the village mayor not chanced to be passing by. He returns Di to the care of her mother, who gets a doctor to tend to her daughter's high fever, then gets the returned Changyu to sit with his dormant sweetheart until the fever passes.

After it does, these two are reunited in a manner completely appropriate to the tenor of *The Road Home* thus far: Di races through the snow to the schoolhouse, where she can hear Changyu and his pupils reciting verses in celebration of the imminent arrival of spring. When she arrives at the school, half the village (it seems) is already there, waiting outside to greet Di and tell Changyu that she has come. But instead of seeing this couple's physical or bodily reunion, we hear their son, Yusheng, reveal in voiceover that his mother and father were kept apart for another *two years* beyond this point, because the lovesick Changyu had illegally returned to Sanhetun from the city before his interrogation was completed.

The coda of the film, back in the stark, black-and-white present, takes up the issue of Changyu's funeral again, as Yusheng submits to his mother's wish for a traditional procession. He then rounds up from surrounding villages the thirty-five or so able-bodied men needed to carry his father's coffin (many of them Changyu's former students), offering to pay them a total of 5,000 yuan (around \$600 in the late 1990s) for their collective effort. But they refuse the money at the same time as they accept the work, which Zhang shows us with his gift for elision as well as simple yet precise framing. In a deeply moving sequence, Zhao Di and her son walk arm-in-arm in the wintry weather toward a camera that is frequently in close, as Changyu's coffin trails behind them and itself is trailed by four to five vehicles (which transport the relief-pallbearers as well as provide light by night).

Along the side of the long road home traversed by this caravan, people stand here and there, shouting out to Mr. Luo according to custom that he is headed in the right direction.

He is buried next to the old well that benignly looks down on his school—the same place where Di will later be buried. Ever true to her love, she remains behind in Sanhetun with him, declining to move to the city with Yusheng at his invitation. Equally true to Changyu's vocation, Di will weave a new red banner for his soon-to-be-renovated schoolhouse—a renovation that will be funded by a donation of no less than 5,000 yuan from Yusheng. Before he leaves his native village, this businessman even consents to teach an impromptu gathering of children for one day, in his late father's memory, in the one-room school that Yusheng himself must once have attended. The elderly Di, accompanied by a host of villagers, listens to the recitation from outside, even as she often did in the past when her husband was leading the class. With this image, one could argue, *The Road Home* should have ended. Sentiment risks emphasis, however, when Zhang cross-fades to a color reprise of the youthful, exuberant Di running across the countryside to the strains of San Bao's florid theme music, only to be frozen in her tracks by a vertically craning camera as the film comes to a close.



**68. *The Road Home* (2000), dir. Zhang Yimou**

Zhang may have tacked on this last glimpse of a young and smiling Zhao Di because she is played by the irresistibly attractive Zhang Ziyi, in her film debut. (She was subsequently cast as Jen, the young tigress, in Ang Lee's popular *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000].) The camera's proximity to and interest in—nay, near mesmerization by—the presence of Ziyi are such that it is hard to ignore her likeness to Zhang's previous leading lady and lost love, the redoubtable Gong Li.

Indeed, the camera lingers on Ziyi's pretty face (not to speak of her lithe body), revealing an infatuation with her that is matched only by the young Di's with Changyu, in what could be called a marriage of the male and female gazes. But Ziyi's prettiness does not need discovering or emphasis: it is immediately there, whereas her tenderness, pride, persistence, and ache must arrive as the narrative progresses. They do not do so sufficiently, in part because Ziyi lacks the conviction (possessed by Gong Li) for the suffering of love, in part because the transparency or superficiality of her performance is made all the more manifest by Zhang's repeatedly bringing her face into loving close-up on the wide, CinemaScope screen.

Unburdened by such lavish attention, Zheng Hao, as the young Luo Changyu, by contrast strikes exactly the right chords of reticence, probity, dedication, and susceptibility. It is easy to believe that the man playing his son in the present, Sun Honglei, *is* his son, because he exhibits similar qualities even if they are buried beneath the harried or preoccupied veneer of a city-dweller. It is not so easy to believe that Zhao Yuelin, as Zhao Di in the present, is the young Di-become-an-elderly woman. Ironically, this is because Yuelin's tearful yet stubborn characterization—unimpeded by the embrace of close-ups, in contrast to Ziyi's performance—is utterly true, marked by deep imaginative conviction as well as the conviction of this actress's own age and experience. Zhao Yuelin may thus convince us that her love for Changyu has survived four decades, but Zhang Zhongxi, in the small role of the itinerant pottery-mender, evokes the artisanal essence of numberless centuries, excepting his own. Except, that is, in places like Sanhetun—a paradox that *The Road Home*, or let us say in this instance the otherwise urban and urbane Zhang Yimou himself, seems lovingly to embrace.

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## Aki Kaurismäki's *The Man Without a Past*

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The protagonist (if that is the word in this case) gets pummeled into oblivion at the start of Aki Kaurismäki's film *The Man Without a Past* (2002), the second entry in his "Helsinki trilogy" after *Drifting Clouds* (1996). (The final member of the trilogy, *Lights in the Dusk*, was released in 2006.) "M," the only rubric (for "mies"—the Finnish word for man—not for "Mörder" or murderer as in Fritz Lang's *M* [1931]) ascribed to this character in the credits, wakes up in a hospital without a scintilla of memory of the man he used to be; but, unlike countless other amnesiacs in any number of forgettable Hollywood B-movies from the 1940s or 1950s (*Man in the Dark* [1953] will do, itself remade from *The Man Who Lived Twice* [1936]), M does not embark on a manic search for the life he used to lead or the places he used to know. But, then again, Kaurismäki has never been one to borrow a plot structure, movie genre, or dramatic device (and, among such devices, amnesia has long since been consigned to the great and growing slag heap of exhausted conventions) and leave it unaltered.

The writer-director of some thirty features and shorts since his 1981 début picture, the music documentary *The Saimma Gesture*, Kaurismäki (who was born in 1957) achieved, in *The Man Without a Past*, American distribution for one of his films for the first time in ten years. It may also be the last, given the facts that Kaurismäki boycotted the 2002 New York Film Festival in solidarity with the U.S. State-Department banned Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami, and that in the same year he absented himself as well from the Academy Awards (where *The Man Without a Past* was the first-ever Finnish nominee for best foreign-language film) to protest the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq. The disappearance of his work from American screens would be a pity, because, not only has Kaurismäki been a European film-festival favorite for around two decades—particularly at Cannes, where *The Man Without a Past* won the Grand Prize in addition to the best-actress award—he also belongs to a small group of European filmmakers who have been able to eke out international careers.

The reason Kaurismäki's possible "disappearance" would be a pity is not only that he hails from Finland, an underrepresented minority on the international cinema scene, but also that his style and tone, if not his subject matter, are unique. That subject is the working class, which in Finland can consist of the most dour, dull, and laconic of human creatures. Kaurismäki's style in his movies, in which he shoots one (uninflected) action or movement or gesture, one (suppressed) emotion, one inaction at a time in uninterrupted time or long takes, and where he limits his focus to a small cast of characters, fits the pared-down lives of his people in a way that seems obvious—now that this Finn has realized it. But it is his darkly comic, subversively hilarious, or deadpan ironic tone that, more than anything else, has drawn attention to his oeuvre and which, combined with his unostentatious

minimalism, lands him somewhere between Buster Keaton and Robert Bresson. (Except in *The Man Without a Past*, where Preston Sturges or Frank Capra replaces Bresson, and whose final shot comes right out of Charlie Chaplin.)

To be sure, Kaurismäki does not glamorize his workers by planting them in heroic plots, but neither does he portray them as the pathetic victims of an oppressive socioeconomic system. Regularly lifting his storylines from classic literature—raiding Dostoevsky for his 1983 film *Crime and Punishment* and Shakespeare for 1987's *Hamlet Goes Business* as well as 1988's *Ariel*—he reduces grand dramatic upheavals and transcendent philosophical concerns to the context of the drab, hemmed-in, nearly hermetic existences led by assembly-line workers, coal miners, restaurant employees, house maids, and garbage men. Alternatively, Kaurismäki takes narratives from popular movies and, as in the case of *The Man Without a Past*, puts his own spin on them.

Indeed, this movie, he has said, is an attempt to pay tribute to Finnish silent melodrama of the 1920s as well to rework the hackneyed plot of a typical Hollywood B-picture. (*The Man Without a Past* even has intimations of the slid-row internationalism found in 1920s European proletarian novels like B. Traven's *The Death Ship* or Victor Serge's *Men in Prison*.) Similarly, Kaurismäki's previous film, *Juha* (1999), was a black-and-white silent movie (save for its musical score and a few other sounds, like that of a door closing) of peasant woes that repositions a silent classic of Finnish cinema—Mauritz Stiller's 1921 picture *Johan*, itself based on a 1911 novel by Juhani Aho—somewhere at the intersection of farce and melodrama known as Aki World.

In this world of his own creation, Kaurismäki uses humor as a defensive, mocking response to the bleakness of a particular type of human existence (as well as to the way that this existence has been charted in previous, mostly American films): that of the bare economic integer, the average worker, in a Scandinavian society defined by averageness. And he complements the humor with stationary camera placements, mostly in the medium-to-full range, which keep us somewhat at a distance from his characters. Kaurismäki's purpose, as I have implied, is not to make the proletarian life seem either more courageous or more miserable than it really is, but rather to get us to think about just what constitutes such a life, and to get his characters to collaborate, not in their own ridicule, but in their meta-cinematic liberation from a ridiculous existence.

Theirs, then, is a life without hope, without horizons, without contest or contrast, and Kaurismäki finds these people precisely at the moment when they are consciously or subconsciously waking up to this fact. Except in *The Man Without a Past*, where the insistently oppositional pattern of cutting (particularly in scenes with authoritarian figures such as a malignant police inspector and an unsympathetic unemployment-office manager) and Timo Salminen's summery cinematography (dominated by the wind-scrubbed blue of the Nordic sky as well



as by warm pigmentation instead of chilly wanness) suggest that grim proletarian sameness will give way in this instance to divine *lumpen* solidarity.

We begin with grimness as M arrives in present-day Helsinki by train in the early morning hours, carrying a suitcase that may contain everything he owns. It is almost immediately after falling asleep on a park bench near the train station that he is savagely beaten, robbed, and left for dead by three thugs. Although anyone else hit over the head with a baseball bat, like M, would at least be unconscious, this man is able to rise up shortly thereafter and stagger to the men's room at the railway station, where he collapses—a bloody mess taken for dead by the porter. We find M next on a gurney, where an emergency-room physician duly pronounces him dead at 5:12 A.M. and a nurse covers his corpse. Promptly thereafter M rises once more, his head swathed in bandages (like Claude Rains in *The Invisible Man* [1933] or Boris Karloff in *The Mummy* [1932]), and stumbles out of the hospital, only to collapse again near the Helsinki waterfront. If, after twice watching the image of an apparently deceased victim abruptly getting up from his deathbed, we needed further evidence that Kaurismäki was beginning his version of a Christian parable-cum-proletarian fable, we get that evidence in the next scene when M is resurrected for a third time.



**69. *The Man Without a Past* (2002), dir. Aki Kaurismäki**

Asleep or comatose on the coast of the Gulf of Finland, M has his boots stolen by a bum (who leaves his sneakers in exchange), then is noticed by two boys who pass by carrying a litter with an upside-down white (gas or water) container attached to it. They wonder aloud whether M is dead, and they go for help in the form of their mother, whom we subsequently see feeding soup to a revived M outdoors as her sons watch. These two look uncannily like the boys in the

painting *The Wounded Angel*, by the Finnish symbolist Hugo Simberg (1873-1917); Simberg's two boys also walk next to a shore carrying a litter, but theirs has a winged yet stooped angel atop it with a head-wound.

The connection between someone like M and an angel certainly would not have been tenuous in Simberg's work. He painted pictures primarily of death and devils—ever-present characters of Finnish folklore—in an ironically humorous manner; for Simberg's poor, crestfallen devils suffer the hardships of fate just like the much-afflicted Finnish people of his time, for whom death itself was an accepted part of everyday life and even a comforting friend. But Simberg treated angels in almost the same way as devils: as vulnerable beings who could accidentally hurt themselves or intentionally be hurt by others. Thus did this symbolist painter and graphic artist connect the netherworld or the otherworldly, as well as the forces of nature, with the fates and dreams of ordinary Finnish people. And thus does Aki Kaurismäki—whose work average Finns find as strange today as they did Simberg's a century ago—do the same in his cinema, for the first time.



#### **70. *The Man Without a Past* (2002), dir. Aki Kaurismäki**

With no memory of his identity or his past life, the (extra) ordinary M is nursed back to health by Kaisa and Nieminen, the parents of the towheaded boys who found him. They are squatters living in a shantytown on the forlorn urban periphery of Helsinki where the rail yards meet the harbor (also the setting of *Lights in the Dusk*, whose title literally translates as “Lights on the Outskirts of Town”)—except that this shantytown consists not of ramshackle huts or makeshift cabins, but of abandoned freight containers instead. M gets one for himself with the help of a security guard named Anttila, who fashions himself the landlord of this post-industrial wasteland. And because M is unable to recall his name or social-security number, which makes finding a regular job and an apartment impossible, it is here on the margins of society that he must find a new life—must experience a

kind of rebirth, that is, which will be touched by its own form of grace. “Life goes on,” he gnomically declares, “not backwards,” so it’s to the future M shall look, to which he senses he has no choice but to look, for the creation of his identity and society.

That future consists of a world where the helpless and homeless must help each other as well as themselves, thus creating something like a society of the disenfranchised. Nieminen, a part-time watchman at a coal yard, introduces M, for example, to the Salvation Army soup kitchen, where he not only gets some soup (and eventually a job loading trucks) but also meets a girl: a Salvation Army officer by the name of Irma, who has infinite trust in God’s mercy. Like M, she is a stylized creature with a solemn, weathered face, a curiously formal manner, and a telegraphed inner life that belies the bland conformity of her surface “style.” In Irma’s case, that inner life—the warmth of which strongly attracts M—is awakened late each night when she returns to her lonely dormitory room, lies down on a narrow bed, and listens to a mid-1960s version of “Do the Shake” by an Anglo-Finnish rockabilly band called “The Renegades.”



**71. *The Man Without a Past* (2002), dir. Aki Kaurismäki**

In M’s case, the revivifying or redemptive music is Blind Lemon Jefferson’s “Crawlin’ Baby Blues,” which he hears on a jukebox salvaged for him from a junk pile and provided with power by a charitable electrician. In this particular land of diminishing returns, the electrical worker asks M only for the promise of one future consideration in return for his favor: “If you see me lying face down in the gutter, turn me on my back.” Perhaps he wishes to be placed in this position so that he can be a bit more comfortable as he listens to popular music—rock ’n’ roll, rhythm and blues, Finnish tango—which has always been a salve for Kaurismäki’s downtrodden characters. In *The Man Without a Past*, the balm of music meets the analgesic of religion when M transforms the Salvation Army Christian band into a

swinging pop combo whose open-air concerts attract large crowds.

Their *début* occurs, not by chance, on the Midsummer Day of June 24<sup>th</sup>—the feast of the birth of John the Baptist, the forerunner as well as baptizer of Jesus Christ—and features a song about memory and the past sung by the venerable Finnish tango singer Annikki Tähti. (She also plays the role of the manager of the Salvation Army thrift shop where M gets a “new” set of clothes.) That song, her 1955 gold record titled “Do You Remember Monrepos?” is a doubly nostalgic lament in this film, for it refers not only to M’s previous life but also to the Finnish province of Karelia (where the spacious park “Monrepos,” or “my rest,” is located), which was annexed by the Soviet Union in 1944 and remains part of Russia today. The song may also refer to Kaurismäki’s previous films, in which the late lamented actor Matti Pellonpää (who died prematurely in 1995, and who himself is resurrected in a photograph that appears on the wall of a bar in *The Man Without a Past*) was frequently featured in roles, like that of M, which required a sad-looking, hangdog, even canine-featured type of character.

Save for this little musical scene with Annikki Tähti, however, *The Man Without a Past* does not dwell on the past. M’s own memory of the past is revived by two incidents in the film: at the shipyard near his “home,” he sees a man cutting metal with an acetylene torch, knows that he can do this, too, and thus remembers that he used to be a welder; and news coverage of a bank robbery that M witnessed has put his face in all the papers, with the result that a woman in the northern town of Nurmes recognizes M as her missing husband, one Jaakko Anttila Lujanen. But M wants no part of his married (welded?) past, and neither does his wife, for she was in the process of divorcing him—in part on account of his gambling habit—when he left home to look for a new or different job in Helsinki (where we first catch up with him).

Returning to the capital after traveling north to confirm his divorce, M encounters the three unwise men who beat him up near the train station, but this time he routs them with miraculous, last-minute assistance from his fellow down-and-outers. In return, they will be the sole beneficiaries of the new potatoes M has recently harvested from a patch of black soil he turned into a garden amidst the twisted metal, decrepit boxcars, and assorted trash heaps that surround his living area. Just so, ex-employees of the bank robber were the gratified beneficiaries of money from his robbery, which, before shooting himself to death, he charged M-the-witness with distributing. (He explained, somewhat disingenuously, that the cash he stole was his own: assets that the bank had frozen when his company went bankrupt.) And Irma, who tells M that he is her first love, will be the continuing beneficiary of his love as, happily united, she and her man walk hand-in-hand away from the camera—only to have our view of them abruptly obscured by a passing freight train until the image then fades to black.

Is this a happy ending? Yes and no. Even though that hurtling, even obliterating train at the end ought to tell you something, certainly there is a strain of sentimentality here to go along with all the whimsy, as there has been throughout *The Man Without a Past*. (By contrast, there is no whimsy to go along with all the sentimentality in *Regarding Henry* [1991], or *The Man Without a Past* written from the point of view of high-end Americans.) But the real miracle in this movie is not that M offers deliverance to the human refuse of Helsinki, or that they offer it to him; it is that M doesn't see any reason, once "recovered," not to treat everybody in the kindly way he was treated when he was down. That includes representatives of officialdom, Finlandia-style, who are less Dickensian villains here than soulless victims of their own faith in bureaucratic regulation.

As for the real villains, the muggers, they beat up M again in Kaurismäki's alternative, unfilmed ending to *The Man Without a Past* and throw him into a trash can. According to the director, "Then comes the garbage truck and picks him up. In the last image, the woman [Irma] is in the garbage field with a stick, trying to find him" (quoted in Kehr, 13). This ending may be an indication that the fairy-tale like plot structure of *The Man Without a Past*, as filmed, should be taken as the vision of a distinctively Finnish afterlife (subsequent to M's beating death in the film's first five minutes), or paradise with a proletarian twist.

Indeed, such a vision seems to have been inspired by the ending of Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), if not by the whole of this neorealist comic fantasy that is simultaneously a veristic social document. For, in *The Man Without a Past*, Kaurismäki wanted, he has said, "to make a film about homelessness without making it so socially declaring" (quoted in Kehr, 13), even as he made a similar picture about unemployment in *Drifting Clouds*. And De Sica himself appears to have had the same intention in *Miracle in Milan*, which followed such grim, nearly mirthless neorealist dramas of his as *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), only itself to be succeeded by the melancholy starkness of *Umberto D.* (1952).

Totò, the good-at-heart hero of *Miracle in Milan*, endeavors to improve the earthly life of the poor in a shantytown on the outskirts of Milan, and he is aided in doing so by a symbolic white dove—the gift of his guardian angel—which possesses the power to fashion miracles. But dove or no dove, the homeless people of Milan are finally no match for the fat cats of this world after oil is discovered on the squatters' stretch of land; so Totò's only resource is to have his dispossessed charges snatch up the broomsticks of street cleaners and miraculously fly off to a land "where there is only peace, love, and good." This finale implies that the poor-in-body but pure-in-soul have no choice but to soar to the skies and seek their heaven apart from the hopeless earth—which is to say, only in their imaginations or in life-after-death.

Thus, to the criticism that this picture's use of the fanciful, even the burlesque or farcical, increasingly overshadows its social commentary about the exploitation



and disenfranchisement of the underclass in an industrialized nation, one can respond that there is nonetheless an element of political despair or pessimism, as well as open-ended spiritual quandary, in the fairy-tale happy ending of *Miracle in Milan*. In fact, the entire film can be seen as an extended metaphor, or hymn, to the role of illusion, fantasy, and myth in life as in art. In a way not dissimilar to Kaurismäki's, then, De Sica tells us that the human impulse to creativity, invention, or fabrication, in the secular and religious realms as well as the aesthetic one in-between, is capable—like the broomsticks that carry the poor over the Cathedral of Milan, or the two Simberg-inspired boys who help bring the wounded M back to life in *The Man Without a Past*—of transcending social problems but not of resolving them.

*Miracle in Milan* takes place somewhere at the intersection of farce and pathos, however, whereas the pathetic is absent from Kaurismäki's films in general and from *The Man Without a Past* in particular. It's not necessarily inherently absent from Kaurismäki's subjects (perhaps as they might be treated by another director), but pathos is certainly absent from all the acting in this *auteur's* cinema. The reason is that his characters, living in a deadeningly glacial environment, tend to lead dead-end existences that appear to have blocked their emotional outlets. So, to have such characters acted in a self-conscious, emotive style would be artistically dishonest (not to speak of being psychologically untrue to the Finnish national character as I know it from long, first-hand experience in this quasi-socialistic country).

Watch Markku Peltola as M, for example, as he walks into a café, orders a cup of free hot water, then slowly extracts a dry, much-used tea bag from a matchbox, ready for re-dunking, and you'll see what I mean: acting that is true to the man, his circumstances, and his experience. Chaplin would have transformed this moment into a miniature ballet of self-pity—into the extraction of our pity—but Kaurismäki prefers to stake his comedy in the glum, the offbeat, and the cool or detached. Peltola may not be lovable or even pitiable as a result, but he may be more characteristically human. His acting, moreover—like that of Kaurismäki veteran Kati Outinen in the role of Irma—may seem superficial, but it is no such thing.

Nor is it easy; in fact, such acting is difficult, for it requires intense concentration, the subtlest of suggestion, and rigorous self-control, even self-denial. (As Kaurismäki would surely agree, it's easy to do the opposite, to laugh, shout, or pout on camera—that is, to externalize emotion.) In other words, this kind of performing calls for far more than simply “doing nothing,” and all the more so, paradoxically—or perhaps appositely—in a film where the characters talk so little. “So you can talk, then?” Kaisa rhetorically asks M after he had failed to speak for the first several hours of their acquaintance. “Sure,” M replies. “I just didn't have anything to say before.” And he means what he says, as in this exchange between him and Irma before he leaves briefly for Nurmes:



M. Will you stay and help me pack?

Irma. But you have nothing.

M. That's why: let's sit and be silent.

You can find similarly understated acting in the films of Kaurismäki's contemporaries, the American Jim Jarmusch and the Japanese Takeshi Kitano, as well as in the cinema of his closest artistic ancestor, the German Rainer Werner Fassbinder. (In a possible culinary reference to Kitano, Kaurismäki includes an incongruous sequence on the train back to Helsinki from Nurmes in which M, seated in the restaurant car, eats sushi with chopsticks and drinks sake. In his *Mystery Train* [1990], Jarmusch himself included an entire narrative strand devoted to precisely the kind of young Japanese couple [here on a visit to America] that we find in Kitano's films.) But Kaurismäki's northern European sensibility is finally his own, and it seems to be growing sweeter as he grows older. I mean by this not only that the good end happily and the bad unhappily in *The Man Without a Past*. I am also referring to the fact that there is no use of temps mort, or "dead time," in this film, as there is in Kaurismäki's darker pictures—particularly *The Match Factory Girl* (1990), where this device dominates the narrative.

"Dead time" occurs on screen when the camera photographs an empty room or street, prior to a character's entrance into the frame, or holds on a location after the character has departed. Directors like Ozu, Antonioni, and Bresson used this as an "anti-action" device, as a way of making their fictions give up some screen-time to the world from which they were drawn, for the purpose of calling attention to the mystery, inviolability, and ultimate stasis of that world. (Jarmusch has also deployed "dead time" to this end.) But Kaurismäki has, in the past, used "dead time" less as an "anti-action" device than as an anti-human one, even as he has sometimes used the frame to fragment human bodies into anonymous limbs, torsos, or extremities.

That is, so insistent was his use of "dead time" (at least once, in *The Match Factory Girl*, creating nearly an entire sequence out of it) in earlier films that he seemed intent, not only on registering the sublime indifference of the physical world to the problems and needs of his characters, but also on positing this people-free world as a comically serene alternative to the deadly one defiled by human cruelty, imperfection, and torpor. Yet there is no such alternative world in *The Man Without a Past*, not because human cruelty, imperfection, and torpor have miraculously disappeared from the earth, but because they have been divinely transcended.

*The Man Without a Past* thus displays a concern about social problems but eschews any direct or critical treatment of them. Does this film imply, less that such problems cannot be solved, than that human nature or fallibility will make

them recur in some other form? Probably, though this is clearly not the major theme of the work. That theme has more to do with the passage of time, the process of memory, and the creation of self out of the contingencies of existence, as well as the operation of consciousness on the objects of the material world—not to speak of the role of Christianity in the organizing of all our fleeting perceptions.

*The Man Without a Past* is not a social-problem picture, then, but to my mind it is something better or more permanent: a meditation on the fundamental solitude of the human condition, sporadically interrupted as it may be by attempts at infinite solicitude on the road to death's final embrace.

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## Andrei Kravchuk's *The Italian*

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Most of the best films about children are about boys: *Shoeshine* (1946), *Germany, Year Zero* (1947), and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), for instance. Moreover, most of the best films about children were made by Italian neorealists, as well as by directors following their socially as well as politically realistic example, from Luis Buñuel with *Los olvidados* (1951) and René Clément with *Forbidden Games* (1952), to Hector Babenco's *Pixote* (1981), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Gianni Amelio's *Stolen Children* (1992), Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998), and Bertrand Tavernier's *It All Started Here* (1999). Now we can add a Russian to this list of Latin Americans, Frenchmen, Italians, Indians, and Iranians, makers all of "children's films." His name is Andrei Kravchuk, and his film is called *The Italian* (2005), in seeming homage to neorealism's country of origin. (Kravchuk was preceded in this style and genre by at least one fellow Russian, Vitaly Kanevski, with his 1989 film *Freeze. Die. Come to Life.*)



### 72. *The Italian* (2005), dir. Andrei Kravchuk

One of the questions that attends *The Italian* and the rest of the above-named films is less *why* they are about children (that's easy: often one can see a war-torn, religiously-divided, or economically-distressed society more clearly, more freshly, through the eyes of its youngest members) than *how* those children gave the performances they did. For, however lovely among film's powers its relationship to children may be (not children in the audience but those on screen), that relationship is also quizzical. Certainly something about performing before a camera stimulates a child's natural instinct to pretend. But all children play and pretend in one way or another; the real wonder is how, without knowledge and often without ambition,

a child will behave on a movie set like a pro, in every sense of that word. I am not necessarily talking here about those children whose parents want them to become film stars, because an extraordinary performance can come from a child without any subsequent career, such as the little girl in Jean Benoît-Lévy's *La Maternelle* (1932). The viewer is left wondering whether such a child remembers, later in life, that she had once moved thousands—in fact, still moves them.

And what about Kolya Spiridonov? This boy, who was nine or ten at the time *The Italian* was made, plays a six-year-old (named Vanya Solntsev) in the film's leading role, its mainstay part. Spiridonov had already been acting for two years prior to this one, in several pictures that never made it to the United States. Still, with his pale blond hair, scrawny frame, and wide but tired, cautious eyes, there is no child-star quality about him. How did he create the thoughtful, oddly private performance that he gives in *The Italian*? As his director, Kravchuk probably wooed Spiridonov and won his confidence, but can that really account for the relative depth of this child's acting? Why did he *want* to do it well? Pleasing his director and his parents, being praised and having his ego massaged, yes, but where did he find the sheer understanding to play the part, and did he even realize that he had found it? It seems fitting to fantasize that the camera speaks a secret, attractive language to certain children who comprehend it and respond. If so, this is a conversation that the camera and the child can, and will, forever keep secret from all the grown ups around.

Let's start with grown up number one in this case, Andrei Kravchuk. *The Italian* is his first solo feature: in 2000, he co-directed (with Yuriy Feting) *The Christmas Miracle*, and he has also directed a few documentaries, made several short films, and done some work for television. One of Kravchuk's documentaries was about his teacher at the St. Petersburg Institute of Film and Television, Semen Aranovich (1934-96), himself a documentary filmmaker who infused his feature films with authentic, documentary-like detail. (As we can see from *Summer Trip to the Seaside* [1978], where he recruited actors from juvenile correctional institutions or foster-care facilities in order to render more accurately his characters' harsh childhood experiences during the early years of World War II.)

What marks Kravchuk as a latter-day neorealist (also as a documentarian-become-fiction filmmaker) is that (1) he and his scenarist, Andrei Romanov, got the idea for *The Italian* from a newspaper article (the origin, as well, of a number of scripts by the best known of Italian neorealist screenwriters, Cesare Zavattini) about an orphan who learned to read and write so that he could find his biological mother; (2) Kravchuk observed children at real orphanages, and then, after deciding to shoot his film on location at the state-run Lesogorsky Children's Home near St. Petersburg (the director's own home town), he cast several of this institution's children in featured roles; and (3) despite shooting in color, Kravchuk and his cinematographer, Alexander Burov (who has also done exceptional work for

the director Alexander Sokurov), use grainy or gritty, black-and-gray-dominated visuals to keep *The Italian* well this side of arrant tear-jerking.

*The Italian* begins with a striking image: a group of young children emerge like phantoms from the mist hovering over a bleak Russian bog, then proceed to push an SUV run short of gas to its destination—the crumbling orphanage where much of the film takes place, a children’s home that is a lingering relic of the Soviet past, now lost amid the snow-covered expanses of Russia’s vast northwest. A nearby highway bustles with commercial vehicles from an entirely different, profit-driven era of free-market enterprise as well as social mobility; and in this particular backwater, the truck drivers slow down only to satisfy their carnal appetites. Excluded from the “brave new world” epitomized by this well-maintained, cost-effective road, the orphanage’s neglected and poorly educated charges survive in the only way they know how: by servicing the privileged highway population as prostitutes and car-washers. In other words, these children are wards of the state in name only.

The orphanage is run by the Headmaster (played by Yuri Itskov), a broken-down man who, in spite of being occasionally drunk, periodically unkempt, and frequently flustered, does the best he can, with limited resources, for the many youngsters abandoned by their parents to his care. The Headmaster notwithstanding, however, the real rulers of the orphanage are found in a group of older orphaned boys whose own leader is Kolyan (Denis Moiseenko). He and his gang operate out of a basement boiler room, where they run a variety of schemes from theft to pimping in order to get by.



### 73. *The Italian* (2005), dir. Andrei Kravchuk

Though we sometimes see younger kids punched and intimidated by these older boys, it’s quite clear that none of this is done arbitrarily or out of cruelty. Instead, the boys are enforcing a code of conduct that demands honesty and the

sharing of assets, all for the good of the group; treated as an equal despite his age, six-year-old Vanya himself contributes money to the group out of the tips he earns washing cars at a local gas station. Ironically, then, socialism is still alive and well in Russia—at least among children at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, who have neither mothers nor fathers to look out for them but who have something comparable in their “brotherhood” of orphans. (It must be said, however, that there is always corruption at the top, and in this socialistic “state,” it resides in Kolyan, who keeps a stash of money for himself and eventually uses it to purchase a motorcycle—an important asset giving him access to the superhighway of capitalism.)

The brightest moments in the lives of these bedraggled and lonely youngsters come when “Madam” shows up with well-heeled foreign couples who want to adopt a child. A wily and formidable woman with a portly and controlling presence (as played by Mariya Kuznetsova, who acted the roles of Catherine the Great in Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* [2002] and Lenin’s wife in the same director’s *Taurus* [2001]), she is the only frequent visitor from outside the confined space of the orphanage. Madam is also a ruthless capitalist entrepreneur, an illegal baby-broker who makes a comfortable living by selling orphaned children for adoption abroad. She thus regards every such international adoption as a financial transaction to be carried out exclusively for profit. In this business she not only has the pliable Headmaster firmly under her thumb, Madam is closely connected to the local authorities as well, who are more than happy (for a price) to help her satisfy the needs of—and navigate the Byzantine Russian courts for—wealthy Westerners in search of a child.

Two of those Westerners are Claudia and Roberto, an amiable Italian couple (the inhabitants of the stalled vehicle from the film’s opening) who have come to Russia to look for a child to adopt, and whom Madam duly escorts to the provincial orphanage. Out of all the youngsters offered, they choose Vanya, and we feel we would do the same: tough-skinned but vulnerable, full of spunk yet deeply sensitive, matter-of-factly confident and self-aware at the same time as he is charmingly naïve (with his best friend, Anton [Dima Zemlyanko], he seriously discusses foreigners’ buying up of Russian children for “spare parts”), Vanya is irresistible as, dressed in his best clothes and with both fear and anticipation on his face, he introduces himself to the Italians. They quickly settle the issue of money with Madam, but because of legal procedures and bureaucratic paperwork, it will be two months before the couple can take the boy home. The film takes place in those two months, during which all the other waifs in the asylum call Vanya “the Italian.” These other orphans, jealous but resigned, consider him lucky to have been chosen for adoption, and so does Vanya—at first.

A few days later, though, a distraught woman (Darya Lesnikova) comes to the orphanage looking for her son, whom she had abandoned at birth and whom she



is now desperate to reclaim. But she is told that the boy she looking for, who was Vanya's friend Mukhin, has recently been adopted by a European couple. Mukhin's biological mother then leaves in despair despite Vanya's attempts to comfort her; the next day, word reaches the orphanage that this guilt-ridden woman committed suicide by throwing herself under a train.

Now Vanya is not so sure about beginning a new life in another country with the Italian couple. Suddenly he has questions about who he is, who his mother is, and he knows he will never be able to find out after he leaves the orphan asylum. What if his own mother should happen to come looking for him, he asks himself? How would she ever find him if he has moved away to Italy? What then? In a second, Vanya has seen answered, with a dash of hope, the question that underpins any orphan's existence. "Why was I rejected?" (We are never told why Vanya's own mother gave him up, because her "psychology" or morality is not the issue here.) Sometimes the answer is that it was all just a mistake, and real parents do return.

Or they are found. And, despite the heartfelt, searingly honest attempts on the part of the other kids to convince the boy that birth mothers do not usually try to find the children they have abandoned (and even if they did, the kids, say, who would want to be with someone who had already deserted him once?), Vanya decides that he has to find his mother even if it means losing the Italian family. In order to find out where she is, however, he needs access to confidential records stored in the Headmaster's office; but he cannot read, and the older kids won't help him until he can read his file for himself. Vanya therefore convinces Irka (Olga Shuvalova), a feisty teenaged orphan who earns money as a prostitute, to teach him. Then, with the help of some of the boys, he retrieves his personal file one night after the Headmaster has passed out from drunkenness.

From it he learns the name of the foster home for newborns, in a far-off city, where he spent his first few months. But that's all Vanya learns, and to discover more he will have to embark on a journey to that foster home. Again with the aid of Irka, he is enabled to do so: she buys him a train ticket (taking the money from Kolyan's stash) and he flees the orphanage just days before the Italian couple is to get custody of him—to become a Dickensian waif, out on the road in the strange, novel world of the twenty-first century. (Speaking of Dickensian waifs, *Oliver Twist* was filmed yet again—this time by Roman Polanski, of all people—in the same year *The Italian* was made: 2005.)

The remainder of this ninety-nine-minute film documents Vanya's search for his origins and ultimately his, and in a sense his country's, identity, as he traverses the hostile Russian terrain (with its perpetual wintry gloom of snow and ice and rain) and navigates through the various generational and social layers of what has become a deeply split society. During his trip by train, by bus, and then on foot, Vanya encounters kindness and sympathy, treachery and duplicity (being beaten and robbed at one point), but he remains unwaveringly focused on the

goal of meeting his mother. He's not desperate or over-emotional in his quest, just determined and smart, persistent and resourceful—making full use of the wiles he has learned in six years of state confinement. Vanya especially needs those wiles (blending into crowds, hiding out, and even outrunning his pursuers) because, together with her mercenary driver-cum-bodyguard, Grigori (Nikolai Reutov), the fuming-mad Madam is in hot pursuit of him and the (potentially lost) income he represents. Not only do these two travel by automobile, but the automobile is an expensive Range Rover, bought from Madam's illicit child-adoption fees to replace her otherwise top-of-the-line, but Soviet-made, Volga.

Finally, Vanya reaches the foster home of his infancy, where he learns the address of his mother from the welcoming nighttime supervisor (Rudolf Kuld), a World War II veteran of simple dignity and uncommon selflessness. She lives at apartment number 3, 25 October Street (ironically, October 25<sup>th</sup> was the starting date of the 1917 Russian Revolution according to the Julian Calendar in use in Russia at the time [for the rest of the world, the date was November 7<sup>th</sup>]), the night supervisor reveals, and he further promises to adopt Vanya himself if the boy does not find or reunite with his mother in the end. He *does* locate her domicile, though not before a run-in on the street, in the rain, with Grigori, who, in a dramatic conversion worthy of Dickens (like much of this tale itself), turns from a pitiless bounty hunter into Vanya's compassionate ally—simply by letting the young fugitive go.

And go he does: right to the apartment where his mother lives. Before ringing the bell, he carefully smooths down his hair and straightens his clothes, in a moment of calm self-possession that recalls the rich inner lives of working-class people living out their existences under the watchful eye of the Dardenne brothers (in such films as *L'Enfant* [2005] and *The Son* [2002]). Previously unsmiling, Vanya now smiles, in close-up, and the up-to-now spare, even timid, notes of Alexander Kneiffel's ethereal score (which has relied mainly on the plink of piano keys, as if a child were trying to pick out a lullaby) swell to flood the soundtrack. But Kravchuk and Romanov abruptly end *The Italian* here, with a fade-out to a blank white screen, as Vanya narrates in voice-over a letter to his friend Anton, who was adopted by the Italian couple in his place.

To wit: we never see the boy's mother, let alone any reunion of this woman with her son. So we get no answers to the questions, "Has Vanya found his birth mother? If so, does she welcome her son with open arms or turn her back on him once again, turning him out into the street and sending him away?" The real question then becomes, of course, why does the film end in this way, denying us the emotional fulfillment of its own concluding, sentimental, even pathetic terms (unlike Valery Akhadvov's *The Greenhouse* [2005], with its similar theme)? Is this ending a cheap trick, or is it part and parcel of *The Italian's* overall artistic design—the design, that is, less of a heart-warming family movie (you can find

that in the similarly-themed Brazilian movie *Central Station* [1998] and the Czech *Kolya* [1996]) or a Russian after-school special, than of a probing social-realist film that raises more issues than it resolves? Its numerous prizes—the “Cinekid Award,” top honors at the “International Young Audience Film Festival,” the “Deutsches Kinderhilfswerk Grand Prix” at the Berlin Festival—not to speak of its being nominated for Best Foreign-Language Film at the 78<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards, suggest the former genre. I think *The Italian* is the latter: a work that has popular ingredients, to be sure, but one that uses them, when all is said and done, to serious artistic ends.

Those ends naturally include the whole issue, or business, of the adoption of Russian orphans by foreigners. But Kravchuk and Romanov are less interested in indicting the parents who abandon these children, the state that warehouses them, or even the ultra-nationalists who would rather see such youngsters spend their first eighteen years in a Russian asylum rather than be brought up, as part of a family, in a foreign country. For a social exposé of the melodramatic kind *The Italian* is not. It is, however, a political allegory at the same time as, on the surface, it is a kind of domestic drama that finally takes the form of a road film.

The first clue to the film’s “deep structure” is its titular character’s last name, Solntsev (close to the Russian word for “sun,” *solntse*), which Vanya shares with the eponymous child protagonist of Valentin Kataev’s 1944 socialist-realist novella *The Son of the Regiment*—this son being a wartime orphan adopted by the army and raised in an elite military school. Vanya’s last name is thus doubly symbolic: not only of the ultimately failed Soviet social experiment, but also of the “sunny” future that might have awaited him, away from the frigid climes and dim prospects of his motherland, in Italy. The second clue to *The Italian*’s subtext is the name of the gang leader at the orphanage, Kolyan, which phonetically resembles the name of the character Tolyan from Pavel Chukhrai’s film *The Thief* (1997), even as the authoritarian behaviors of these two figures mirror each other.

What these clues suggest is that *The Italian* is scrutinizing and consequently rejecting several successive models of social organization, as its naïve child protagonist bypasses the mistakes and inadequacies of the past to arrive at his own, post-*glasnost* ideal of human commonality. Those models include both the “new capitalism” of the economically exploitative Kolyan and the “utopian socialism” of the classless, motherless, and fatherless (if not stateless) brotherhood of orphans, as well as the “old totalitarianism” of the mercilessly domineering Madam. Madam’s previous ownership of a Volga, for example—the Soviet car once accessible almost exclusively to Brezhnev-era political and cultural elites—traces her lineage back to the Communist *nomenklatura*. So do her methods of achieving her goals: her threats not only to lock up the willful, non-compliant Vanya in isolation, but also to send him to a home for the mentally retarded, followed by assignment to a labor camp, recall Soviet-era psychiatric abuses against political and intellectual

dissidents. Madam is thus little more than the cynical, selfish functionary of a corrupt former regime—yet one clever enough to continue exploiting her country and her people up to the present in the guise of a free-market entrepreneur.

In this scheme, where does Grigori, Madam's chauffeur and bodyguard, fit? In a sense, with Kolyan and Madam herself, he completes *The Italian's* new-capitalist triad. In the age bracket between his boss and the orphanage gang-leader, Grigori represents the *glasnost*-era generation that succumbed, under pressure from its "superiors," to the former Soviet elites' immoral re-appropriation of power and wealth. An obedient executor of Madam's orders throughout the movie, Grigori suddenly, and seemingly implausibly, changes his ways when he disobeys Madam by not returning Vanya to her custody. But Grigori's change of heart is not so implausible from the perspective of the film's political allegory. For that change, or conversion, appears to imply that his generation's squandered aspirations toward political morality, social justice, and—perhaps above all—personal responsibility are ultimately recoverable, and may even constitute the foundation of the ideal living arrangement sought by the child protagonist of *The Italian*.

That ideal living arrangement is not to be found in a children's home, and, apart from the obvious reasons for this, the patriarchal heads of both the Petersburg orphanage and Vanya's original foster home reveal why. Certainly neither is a bad man, as I have already made clear, but each is identified with his particular generation in such a way that he becomes part of the film's problem, as opposed to its solution. The Headmaster, for example—a disillusioned 1960s dreamer who ascribes his failure to become an elite fighter pilot, *à la* Yuri Gagarin, to the absence of a benevolent mentor by his side—may be uncomfortable with Madam's strong-armed tactics, but he himself delivers such an abusive tirade against the dejected young woman who comes to recover her child that he inadvertently causes her suicide.

The nighttime supervisor, for his part, also indiscriminately condemns mothers who choose to abandon their children at birth, for in his authoritarian model of self-sacrifice and civic duty—doubtless derived from his wartime service—there is no place for individual fulfillment, personal motivation, or self-justification. The supervisor's "collectivist" point of view is subtly suggested not only by the street on which his foster home is located ("Frunze," from the name of Mikhail Vasilevich Frunze [1885-1925], the "father" and ideologue of the Red Army) and his brand of cigarettes ("Belomorkanal," introduced in 1932 to commemorate the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal [abbreviated as *Belomorkanal*], which was the site of one of Stalin's first "re-education through labor" projects). It is also suggested by his surprise at learning that "Solntsev" is, in fact, Vanya's actual last name, the one he inherited from his biological mother—and not, like many a parentless newborn named by a doctor or a nurse, from a real or fictional Soviet war hero. (We, or literary types in general, may know that "Solntsev" derives from

the last name of the protagonist of Kataev's novel, but Vanya's mother would not know and therefore obviously did not take her and her son's surname from this character.)



**74. *The Italian* (2005), dir. Andrei Kravchuk**

Vanya, of course, is not surprised at the origin of his last name. For he is a naïf in the best sense: a person with an inherent faith not only in the concept of family, but also in people generally; with a genuine capacity for love, compassion, and forgiveness; and, most importantly, with a sense of personal responsibility both for his own life and that of the human being (genetically) closest to him: his mother. Refusing to play into the latter-day nostalgia for Soviet state-ism or the contemporary Russian infatuation with unrestricted market capitalism, Kravchuk and Romanov hold up Vanya's instinctive belief system as the ideal model of social action. Vanya *takes charge* of his and his mother's lives, that is to say, thereby challenging the commonly held conviction about the ineffectualness of individual action in Russia, eloquently if fatalistically summed up in the phrase "*ot nas nichego ne zavisit*" ("nothing depends on us"). And, through the courageous example of Vanya Solntsev, *The Italian* admonishes its predominantly adult audiences in its native Russia to start taking responsibility for their own future—one that is clearly inseparable from the welfare of Russia's children.

The film locates the model community, then, in the nuclear family, representing it as the basic cell, or logical framework, from which to build a civil society in a truly democratic Russia. Will Vanya and his birth mother reunite and achieve that community at the end of *The Italian*? The "warmth" of their surname implies that

they are destined to come together, whereas the “coldness” of the film’s final image—a blank white screen—suggests the very opposite. (Similarly, the narrative point of view the filmmakers adopt—that of the six-year-old protagonist—conflicts with their almost always photographing him from above [instead of from a ground- or eye-level perspective], in high-angle shots that make this little boy seem even littler and less able than he is.)

In other words, Vanya’s dreams of a sunny Motherland clash with the reality of the wintry Madam-culture he continues to inhabit. That is *the truth* of *The Italian*’s otherwise abrupt conclusion, an allegorical truth that extends to all of Russia’s orphans. If you want emotional or cathartic closure, you’ll have to find it somewhere else. And if you want to know what happened in the end to the real-life orphan whose story inspired Vanya’s, read the Russian newspapers.

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## Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*

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The Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan achieves a universality of reference and resonance in his films in several ways. First, in his own unusually quiet, understated manner, he confronts the big artistic questions: what are we doing with our lives and why; how does the past influence both the present and future; how may we reconcile our desires and ideals with the disappointments of reality; how can our relationships with family and friends survive intact when the world is changing so quickly and people are forever being encouraged to move on in search of something better than what they already have? In this respect, Ceylan has rather more in common with the great masters of art-house cinema than with most of his contemporaries.

But he also achieves a universality of reference and resonance in his work through an extreme (and, of course, in many ways deceptive) simplicity of narrative, as well as by focusing closely on specifics. It is frequently the case that the stories that resound most widely are just those: the ones firmly rooted in the particularities of a filmmaker's environment and experience. Ceylan takes this truism to an extreme, using narratives clearly inspired in part by his own experiences, casting family and friends, using unusually small crews, and producing, writing, shooting, directing, and editing all his films himself. It is clear from Ceylan's films that he knows exactly what he's talking about, because he has rich personal experience of the people, places, and situations in his films. Since that knowledge is so profound and precise, he is able to communicate it to us in such a way that we, too, feel that we know these people, the places where they live, and the situations in which they find themselves.

Not that Ceylan's work could adequately be described as "realist." To be sure, there is an honesty, an authenticity about it that serves as a wonderfully sturdy foundation for the artifice he creates, but, as in the case of Abbas Kiarostami's beguiling blends of "reality" and "fiction," Ceylan's methods are essentially poetic. Both his narrative and his visual style might be termed "impressionistic": he favors ellipsis, repetition or a variation on it that could be called rhyme, and (discreet) metaphor; and he is acutely alert to place and time, as expressed by the seasons, by changes in sound and light, and by how these changes affect the characters' moods.

Besides Kiarostami, there are two other points of comparison I would like to suggest. Ceylan's awareness of how the experience of individuals is affected by changes in the world around them recalls the work of the Taiwanese filmmaker Edward Yang. Then there is the humor in the Ceylan *oeuvre*, which is so droll, so deliciously deadpan, so inextricably tied up with a view of life as darkly absurd or maybe even tragic, that one cannot help but think of the American Buster Keaton. While Keaton's movies are very funny, they are frequently, in

their own way, quite serious, just as Ceylan's films are quite serious at the same time as they too, in their own way, are often very funny—and most definitely meant to be enjoyed, not merely discussed or written about.

Let us begin our consideration of Ceylan's films to date with his first feature, *The Small Town* (1997), which has a gentle, even meandering narrative, the first half of which focuses on the seemingly inconsequential experiences of a teenaged girl and her younger brother as they go to school and play about in the fields and forests around their small Anatolian town. The second half of the picture has the children listening in on what becomes a slightly heated discussion between different generations as their family camps out for the night during a harvest festival. Little happens, but Ceylan subtly ensures that we become acutely aware not only of the children's perceptions of the world around them—the weather, the pace of life, the places where they can feel free—but of the social, economic, and historical factors that have shaped this family and its experience of life: most notably, the lure of a better, or at least more profitable and less provincial, life in the city.

*Clouds of May* (1999), set in the same Anatolian town, centers on a filmmaker now living in Istanbul who returns to visit his parents and, it transpires, to make a film in which he eventually persuades them to play the leads. Again, not a great deal happens: the filmmaker mopes around; his father worries about his orchard; a cousin bored with life in the provinces helps out on the movie and asks the filmmaker to try to find him work in Istanbul. But what is so interesting is that the filmmaker's parents (Emin and Fatma Ceylan)—besides being Nuri Bilge Ceylan's own parents—are the same people we saw playing the grandparents in *The Small Town*; that the cousin here also played a dissatisfied youth in the earlier film; and that we see a re-creation in *Clouds of May* of the shooting of the night-picnic scene from *The Small Town*. The effect is in some respects not unlike that in Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) when we see a fictional re-creation of the filming of a scene from his earlier *And Life Goes On . . .* (1992). Also reminiscent of the Iranian's work (most notably *The Wind Will Carry Us* [1999]) is Ceylan's less than flattering (self-) portrait of the filmmaker, who quite happily exploits all those around him to further the making of his film while barely registering that they have needs and concerns of their own.

Though *Clouds of May* boasts a slightly tighter narrative than its predecessor and is shot not in black and white (as Ceylan's first feature was) but in color, it clearly inhabits the same world as *The Small Town*. On the surface, *Distant* (2002) would seem to entail something of a change in tack from these two pictures. Set in a wintry Istanbul, it charts the growing tensions in the relationship between a clearly disenchanted Istanbul photographer and the country cousin who is staying in his apartment while he looks for work on the ships that might enable

him to go abroad. Save, then, for the fact that the city sophisticate is now a commercial photographer rather than a filmmaker, *Distant* might indeed be seen as something of a sequel to *Clouds of May*—especially since the restless cousin is played by M. Emin Toprak, who played the cousin in *Clouds of May* as well as in *The Small Town*.

We are not simply talking in this instance about linear progression, however: precisely because these three films cannot quite be reduced to a series of works that follow from one another in a straightforward narrative fashion, there is a resonance here that not only echoes some of the self-reflexive and formal concerns of Kiarostami but that also gives the films a certain universality. Precisely because he could be but is not quite playing the same character in each film, Toprak (in fact Ceylan's cousin) takes on a near-archetypal status as a figure representing all those country cousins who were left behind by their peers to get bored at home and who, when they eventually made it to the city, did not fit in that well anyway. The same is true for Muzaffer Özdemir, who was the filmmaker in *Clouds of May* and plays the photographer in *Distant*: his characters eloquently evoke the disappointments of all those who had no small talent but who, for one reason or another, never lived up to their initial promise or fulfilled their dreams—instead, almost without noticing, selling their souls to Mammon.

Even more personal in its self-reference than *Clouds of May*, Ceylan's intimate drama *Climates* (2006) stars the filmmaker himself and his wife (and frequent co-scenarist, Ebru Ceylan) as a hardworking couple whose jobs frequently keep them apart, thus placing their marriage firmly on the rocks. For this reason, Ceylan's fourth feature could also have been titled *Distant*, but *Climates* is an equally appropriate description that relates to the film's seasonal structure. This picture's wry melancholy, its dramatic and psychological subtlety, its remarkably assured, intimate sense of scale (Ceylan never yields to the temptation of hyperbole) as it chronicles the disintegration of the couple's relationship—these qualities will be familiar to anyone who saw *Distant* or Ceylan's earlier work. What is new in *Climates* is the detail afforded by his shooting in high-definition digital video for the first time. Breathtakingly beautiful, the meticulous images here remain as richly evocative as those in Ceylan's earlier work, yet make the viewer realize how few filmmakers have so far responded to the possibilities offered by digital technology. Then again, Ceylan—like Isa, the character he plays in *Climates*—is himself a photographer (as is his wife).

On the surface, Ceylan's next film, *Three Monkeys* (2008), a slow-burn, guilt-ridden melodrama, is his weakest, if only because it has the most conventional plot. An opening scene depicts a businessman-cum-politician (played by Ercan Kesal, the third member of Ceylan's screenwriting team, who also appeared in a

minor role in *Distant*) killing a pedestrian in a hit-and-run accident that could demolish his career as a public servant. But he quickly enlists his lower-class chauffeur to take the blame and go to prison in exchange for his salary (which will continue to be paid to his struggling family) and a large sum of cash. Some months later, the chauffeur is still behind bars, but the seeds are being planted for another violent crime as his wife begins an affair with the very politician responsible for the family's debilitating situation, while his teenaged son (who discovers his own mother's treachery) grows increasingly rebellious.

As the title implies ("see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil"), *Three Monkeys* examines the impact of actively ignoring the misdeeds all around us, and around this premise Ceylan creates a film that is deeply emotional yet highly restrained, its conflict gradually dissipating rather than exploding into chaos. The skill with which the director conveys the complex inner lives of his characters is perfectly complemented by the way in which his peerless visual style encroaches upon an otherwise straightforward narrative. The brooding melancholy of *Three Monkeys*—which was mostly shot in an apartment next to a railway line and overlooking the Sea of Marmara in Istanbul—is built of subdued, muddled interiors, expansive, purple skies, and sporadic thunderstorms, all adding up to a masterful vision of a world in perpetual shadow.

When he made *Three Monkeys*, Ceylan said he wanted to try out a different kind of story than he had explored in his previous films. But *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010), the director's sixth feature, is something even more impressive: an elaboration on the interests and motifs in his work that expands its artistic ambition. Ceylan keeps the details even scantier here and instead turns up the atmosphere, as most of the story unfolds in heavy shadows punctuated by bright patches of light. The effect is akin to that of a *film noir* rendered in oil paints—or of an analytical brain-teaser realized in patiently philosophical terms.

We know immediately, today, that a film with the title *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* is not going to be a fairy tale. The title thus ironically implies the reverse of the fantastic. What we have here could in fact better be called a metaphysical road movie or an epistemological murder mystery—at once sensuous and cerebral, profane and transcendent, "empty" and abundant—that simultaneously recalls Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960), Kiarostami's *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), and Porumboiu's *Police, Adjective* (2009), all artworks that invoke genre in order to revise or expound upon it. Ceylan even references westerns with his title—specifically, Sergio Leone's 1968 film *Once Upon a Time in the West*—but the only aspects of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* that could be called "western" are its nominal concentration on violence and masculinity and its relegation of women largely to the status of silent, off-screen presences.



**75. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010), dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan**

Long and slow at 157 minutes but wholly engrossing, Ceylan's film—whose seemingly digressive narrative is in fact meticulously constructed—begins at dusk. We see great blankets of approaching night hanging over the plateau of Anatolia in eastern Turkey. Then, far off, the headlights of three cars sparkle as they burrow their way toward us through the dark—a darkness pierced by barking dogs and distant thunder, and heightened by rain clouds that obscure the moon. Almost all of the first two hours of this picture (as shot by Ceylan's usual cinematographer, Gökhan Tiryaki) takes place at night, mostly outdoors, in the cars' lights. And soon we become aware—a parallel never heavily handled—that this search through darkness implies other, less literal searches.

The searchers first appear *en masse*, pulling into a turn in the dirt road where a solitary young tree pierces the parched amber landscape like a shot arrow. Making the most of his widescreen frame, or CinemaScope format, made for a landscape like this, Ceylan initially keeps his distance from the characters by showing them in extreme long shot (shots that are often static and held or protracted): a vantage that accentuates how small they are in relation to the larger world enveloping them. Ceylan soon cuts in for a closer look, however—a look that nonetheless isolates or separates at the same time as it enlarges—as he turns his brilliant eye for natural vistas to the gaunt and rounded, pitted and smooth faces of his travelers. As one after the other face fills the frame in this fugue of faces (*sans* any actual music)—a tear violently trembling in one man's eye while the memory of a dead wife hovers in another man's look—it becomes evident that the greater mystery here is human physiognomy, or the geography of the characters' faces.



**76. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010), dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan**

A man has been murdered in this film, and a small battalion—a forensic doctor, a prosecutor, a police chief, several soldiers, various diggers and drivers, and a transcriber with a laptop—has invaded the countryside with the self-confessed murderer to dig up the body. The trouble is that the accused, Kenan, was drunk when he committed the murder, it was night, and he cannot remember where he buried the body. So off the men go in two cars and a Jeep, driving up and down the low, rolling hills of Anatolia. But this search will not end until just before dawn because, although all the men know the local countryside, it looks much the same: one watering trough for livestock looks like another, and what does the suspect mean by a “round tree,” anyway?

Yet most of the film is chiefly concerned not with the crime or the murderer, but with the leaders of the search; not with the dead but with the living: the prosecutor, the doctor, and the police chief. As the rambling, shambling, for some time seemingly futile investigation proceeds, Ceylan uses it as the framework for a richly quizzical meditation on a range of themes: the mores and manners of provincial life; the way we are shaped by where we live; the balancing of ethics and pragmatism; our responsibilities to our loved ones and the extent to which children invariably pay for their parents’ mistakes; our need to hold on to the banalities of life when faced with life’s absurdities and misfortunes (including death).





**77. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010), dir. Nuri Bilge Ceylan**

The principal conversations are between the prosecutor and the doctor as they travel from place to place, seemingly insignificant, strangely unemphatic conversations that, as in Anton Chekhov's work, delineate the characters of these two men—the accomplished, ferreting prosecutor who seems to be a widower, the quiet, scientific-minded, rationalistic doctor who is divorced—at the same time as they are wonderfully allusive and sometimes dryly, even darkly witty. (A number of quotations from stories by Chekhov—also a medical doctor, like Ercan Kesal, co-scenarist of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*—are incorporated in the film's script.)

At one point during the night, after several futile attempts to find the body, the men drive to a village for a respite. There they are greeted by its leader, or *mukhtar* (played by Kesal), who, amid a hospitable meal, tells the travelers that the town needs a new morgue and that he cannot get the funds for it. Most of the young people have left for the big city, he says, and when old villagers die, the young come home for the first time in years and beg to see the dead one last time. But bodies do not keep well in the old morgue, the *mukhtar* continues, and they start to smell. And then the *mukhtar*'s lovely, reticent teenaged daughter comes in to serve tea, her face bathed in a light that until then has eluded the searchers. Her mere presence hushes the men, who, talking fairly roughly, have been ensealed in a different world and who now are confronted with a token of the world from which they come. Thus does Ceylan gracefully juxtapose the grimness of death, which haunts this film, with the effulgence of natural beauty—not only that of the *mukhtar*'s daughter but also of the natural world around the men, which none of them seems to see or appreciate.

The murder victim is at last found, but the reason for the crime is never spelled out, though we can deduce that the victim's son was actually fathered by the murderer, who let this secret slip in his drunkenness and then had to kill or be killed. What is important is the ancillary, internal drama in the film: that of the

searchers and the chance such an otherwise disagreeable search gives these careworn officials to talk and interact in ways that convey much about each of them. What they say is simply not what we might expect from men investigating a murder; a police caravan winds through the night on a search-and-recovery mission, then, but the chief people in it are otherwise concerned. This night is for them just one more professional assignment, and they converse about things of more interest, which happen to include a quite different death—about a woman who predicted to her husband (the prosecutor, it is strongly suggested) the exact day of her own death and mysteriously died on schedule, but whose death may have been the result of a self-induced heart attack (through drugs, the doctor deduces) on account of her husband's infidelity.

The morning after the discovery of the body, the doctor and the prosecutor deliver the corpse to the autopsy room of the local hospital. The prosecutor brings in the woman involved in the paternity quarrel, the victim's wife, who—almost mutely—identifies her husband and is led away. After the technician complains to the doctor about the old instruments he has to use, the procedure begins. We do not see the actual autopsy, but we are at the table while the technician proceeds and as the doctor dictates his findings to a stenographer. Thus we are present while a human being is being reduced to its components, which makes humbly plain the victim's commonalty with us—or the chillingly thin line that separates life from death.

The doctor, exhausted after this punishing night, then goes into his office and switches on his computer, where he notices—as he must surely do every time—personal photos of himself. Ceylan here enigmatically suspends the film's action just to show us these images, as a series of stills of the doctor as a young man, in love, fills the screen. At the very end, the doctor is at a window watching the victim's wife and her son (perhaps twelve years old) walk away in the distance with the husband's belongings. The boy suddenly sees that a football has been accidentally kicked far from a schoolyard and he runs, retrieves it, and kicks it back to the children in the yard. The doctor watches as if this tiny commonplace incident involving two people who are connected with a crime reminded him that, like the search-caravan in the night, like him as he looked at pictures of his younger self on the computer, these burdened individuals are also otherwise engaged or concerned. Thus, we are left to conclude, does the whole oddly integrated enterprise of life wind on.

More through their faces than their words, their being rather than their “acting,” the cast of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* amply provides the authenticity to carry off an artistic enterprise as ambitious as this one—especially Muhammet Uzuner as the doctor and Taner Birsil as the prosecutor. Ceylan's own growing reputation thus continues to grow, for he uses the realistic film as an avenue to what lies around, beyond, and beneath the realism.

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## AFTERWORD: “WRITING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE, ON FILM: A REVIEW/ ESSAY”

Every film of Shakespeare brings persistent questions about Shakespeare on film. The arts of theater and film, cognate though they are, never seem more disparate than in such an instance. The basic breach here is between a form that is classic, whatever its romantic ventures, and a form that is realistic, no matter how romantically it too ventures. The differing organisms of theater and film are never more patent than when Shakespeare is the film subject. Both arts build on texts, but Shakespeare wrote for an audience that liked to listen and films are made for people who primarily like to watch. Put otherwise, Shakespeare lives in his language; films are—the old term is perfect—moving pictures. The two aims blend occasionally but not consistently.

In a film, moreover, Shakespeare must always be condensed. Of course the texts are almost always condensed somewhat in the theater (who today would want all the verbal haberdashery that entranced the Elizabethan audience?), but film condensations are done in order to make room for cinema, so the richness of the work as play is bruised. (Some academics nonetheless hold that filmic elements improve Shakespeare.) Much of the debate on this subject would melt if a plain fact were recognized: a film of Shakespeare is not the original in an equivalent form; it is a different creature. This is clear enough in opera—no one, for example, mistakes the Boito-Verdi *Otello* (1887), tremendous as it is, for *Othello* (1604). The opera is a quite separate work, grown from Shakespeare and trying through its own means to equal it. Similarly, no one ought reasonably to mistake Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* (1989), fine as it is, for the work that its author designed for the stage. I'd like to begin here by considering Branagh's *Henry V*, one of the finest of the many Shakespearean adaptations made over the last twenty-five to thirty years. Then I shall review five other Shakespearean adaptations, including another one by Branagh, made between the years 1999 and 2004.

Although I believe, with James Agee, that “the creation of new dramatic poetry is more important than the re-creation of old,” and that “for such new poetry, movies offer the richest opportunity since Shakespeare’s time” (365), some remarks are nonetheless in order about a film based on the work of so “cinematic” a dramatic poet. By “cinematic” in this case, I mean not only Shakespeare’s episodic form, which like film can move easily through time and space, but also his creation of poetic word-pictures that lend themselves in some measure to screen transformation—into visual images or metaphors.

Let’s start with the play itself: depending on your understanding of history, *Henry V* (1599) is either Granville-Barker’s sentimental appeal to patriotism fatally devoid of “some spiritually significant idea” (146), or it is Yeats’s tragically ironic treatment of an amiable egotist whose “gross vices” and “coarse nerves” (108) render him capable, finally, of moral evil. To most of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, Henry was a great national hero whose exploits of two centuries earlier (he was King of England from 1413 until his death in 1422), depicted onstage, could only fan the patriotic fervor of a generation that had seen the defeat of the Spanish Armada.

To Laurence Olivier, directing and starring in the first film version of the play in 1944, Henry was the same national hero leading an outnumbered, underequipped army in the service of a different cause: the rallying of patriotic spirit during England’s fight for survival against Nazi Germany. To Kenneth Branagh, directing and starring in the second film version (and in his first film, after much theater work in Britain) in an era of post-empire and relative anti-militarism, Henry is “someone who at times captured a certain fineness of the human spirit, and at other times was a really ruthless bastard. I wanted to get all of that. Shakespeare doesn’t apologize for this man—in fact, he is quite uncompromising in the way he presents him” (Press Conference, New York premiere of *Henry V*, November 1989) at the same time as he depicts a Henry who led to victory an English army that seemingly had no chance, in a stage of despair and decay as it were, with its discipline ragged.

Branagh is right, and he includes in his film much of the unattractive side of Henry that Olivier understandably had omitted, despite an apparent attempt on Branagh’s part to create a sympathetic analogy between Henry’s army and the self-confessedly dispirited Britain of the late 1980s. Unlike Olivier, for example, Branagh does not dilute through comedy the early scene in which the young king seeks tortuous legal justification from two ecclesiastics for the extension of his royal power to certain French duchies and ultimately to the French crown. Olivier’s Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of Ely are straight man and clown to Henry’s good-natured, gutsy adventurer; Branagh’s churchmen are astute politicians looking to protect Church monies and land from Henry’s grasp, even as the King looks to carry out his dying father’s advice that he “busy giddy minds

/ With foreign quarrels" (IV.iii.341-342, *Henry IV, Part Two*; 1363) so as to quiet rebellion at home. One shot epitomizes the relationship between Henry and his prelates (the kind of shot which, if somehow translated to the stage, would seem unduly forced): just before deciding to invade France, he is at the center of a tight frame, with Canterbury and Ely in profile, crowding him on either side.

Another shot shortly thereafter visually underscores the inevitability of war, the fact that nothing will get in Henry's way: as he commands that "every man now task his thought, / That this fair action may on foot be brought" (I.ii.309-310; 1464), the King exits, followed by his lords, by walking directly at the camera. This impetuous movement carries over into Henry's next scene, during which he cunningly and somewhat pleasurably stalks and entraps—literally as well as figuratively—the three English noblemen (one of them his cousin, the Earl of Cambridge) who had taken French gold to assassinate him.

Olivier eliminates this scene (perhaps feeling that this material was inappropriate to wartime) in addition to three others included by Branagh: Henry's threats to Charles VI of France that "hungry war" will open its "vasty jaws" and leave nothing but "the widows' tears, the orphans' cries, / The dead men's blood, the pining maidens' groans" (II.iv.104-107; 1475); the hanging of Bardolph for robbing a French church, an execution ordered by Henry (but only mentioned by Shakespeare); and Henry's vicious threats to the Governor of Harfleur to surrender or

. . . in a moment look to see  
The blind and bloody soldier with foul hand  
Defile the locks of your shrill-shrieking daughters;  
Your fathers taken by the silver beards,  
And their most reverend heads dash'd to the walls;  
Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,  
. . . (III.iii. 110-115; 1480)

(Even Branagh, however, stops short of having Henry give his soldiers the strategic order during the Battle of Agincourt to cut their prisoners' throats—an order made all the more chilling by the fact that it *precedes* Henry's discovery of the killing of the boys [who maintain the English baggage train] by the French.)

So as to remove all taint from the character of his Henry V, Olivier goes as far as to delete the King's prayer on the eve of the decisive Battle of Agincourt (1415), in which he asks that God not make him pay this day for his father's usurpation of the crown from Richard II. (Henry's father, Bolingbroke, became King Henry IV.) But Branagh is right to keep this petition in his film, for it is key to an understanding of the play as Shakespeare wrote it and as it occupies the last slot in the cycle containing *Richard III* (1593), *Henry IV, Part One* (1597),



and *Henry IV, Part Two* (1598). In these plays, Shakespeare presents a society in transition from the medieval view of the world as a great chain of being, an utterly planned cosmos, under the direction of one God, to the Renaissance and even modern view of the world as a collection of self-serving individuals under the rule of secular—and therefore mutable—law. Divine law, in the form of Richard II's divine mandate, is ruptured when Richard gets deposed by Bolingbroke, and the rebellions that follow (predicted by Richard) in both parts of *Henry IV* can be seen as a natural consequence of the break in the venerable structure of authority.

Thus *secular* law reigns at the start of *Henry V*, twisted to the new king's aggressive purposes by divine, and divinely acquisitive, hands. And despite Henry's invocation of the Lord at strategic moments in the drama, indeed, his pairing of God's will with England's destiny, it is secularism that wins the day at Agincourt and continues to do so during the troubled reign of Henry VI, "Whose state so many had the managing, / That they lost France and made his England bleed" (Epilogue, lines 11-12; 1520). [The infant Henry VI succeeded his father, who died not long after his triumph without ever having truly consolidated his gains in France.] Branagh, in contrast to Olivier, includes these deflating lines by the Chorus at the end of his film—a chorus that has, up to this point, discharged its role as a narrative bridge in confident tones—and his aim in this as well as in his depiction of a complex Henry V could only be to capture Shakespeare's play in all its ambivalence: as a patriotic, even jingoistic paean to King and country, on the one hand, and an ironic, even bitter denunciation of moral and political disorder, on the other. That disorder pervades the three *Henry VI* plays (1591-92) together with *Richard III*, in all of which England continues to suffer retribution for Henry Bolingbroke's overthrow and murder of a rightful monarch, Richard II. In Shakespeare's wishful, providential scheme, only with the restitution of the legitimate successor at the end of *Richard III*—Henry VII, the first Tudor king—can England enjoy peace and greatness once again. There is but temporary peace at the end of *Henry V*, and the King's newfound greatness will be short-lived.

As a script, then, Branagh's version of *Henry V*—which is notably more complete than Olivier's—succeeds in capturing the essence of Shakespeare's play, of Henry's character, which is high praise for any film adaptation of a literary or dramatic source and particularly of Shakespeare (where judicious cutting of dialogue is necessary to avoid the duplication of information and ideas supplied or suggested by the visuals). Indeed, the film even includes two flashbacks of tavern scenes from *Henry IV, Part Two* in order to suggest the profligacy Prince Hal-become-King Henry has left behind as well as the humanity, the fellow-feeling, he has retained from Falstaff's world. But why include these scenes and not others from that are equally important to the formation of Henry's character? I'm thinking of those scenes that depict a loveless, morbid, impudent Hotspur obsessed with the achievement of individual glory on the battlefield, a man whose boldness so

attracts his enemy, Prince Hal, that the latter is moved, toward the end of *Henry IV, Part One*, to pronounce a benediction over Hotspur's dead body—a benediction that includes the following ill-omened lines:

Ill-weav'd ambition, how much art thou shrunk!  
When that this body did contain a spirit,  
A kingdom for it was too small a bound,  
But now two paces of the vilest earth  
Is room enough. . . . (V.iv.87-91; 1220)

Kenneth Branagh's performance as Henry certainly could have benefited from a few more parts ruthless Hotspur and a few less parts complaisant Falstaff—Branagh tries to project the former quality, especially in moments like the speech before Harfleur, but his doughboy face and woolly voice get in his way. *Selfish* charm is what Henry should exude, yet Branagh can't quite manage that and there was no room for it in Olivier's idealized conception of the character. Patrick Doyle's nearly continuous music does help Branagh with one aspect of his character but not this one, since it emphasizes his alternatively sentimental and majestic topside, never his dark underbelly. (The near continuousness of this music, by the way, highlights a difference between Branagh's film of *Henry V* and Olivier's, where William Walton's score was good *theater* music—easily adaptable for use in a stage presentation of the play during the entrances, exits, battles, and so on.)

Kenneth Macmillan's cinematography, by contrast, simultaneously contains both sides of Henry's world: indoors, warm sepia tones over a palette mainly of browns and blacks and grays; outdoors, more or less, the same narrow range of color embraced by a softening mist, which becomes most prominent where it is most needed—at the brutal Battle of Agincourt, with its clashing swords, whistling arrows, falling horses, and flying bodies. How appropriate that in what would finally be a victory for secularism, Macmillan should keep his camera low to the ground—to the muck of earthly reality as against the pomp of imperial-celestial circumstances—and in fairly close, at a few points even agonizingly extending earthly time by shooting in slow motion.

Branagh's Agincourt is an anti-heroic, grotesque ballet fought in the rain, whereas Olivier's was a glorious, decorative pageant that took place on a sunny day, with the heavens as a backdrop. (Branagh's Agincourt thus has more in common with the mud-soaked, fragmented, gruesomely powerful Battle of Shrewsbury in Orson Welles's *Chimes at Midnight* [a.k.a. *Falstaff*, 1966] than with Olivier's shining set piece.) Toward the end of this sequence in each film (Act IV, scene viii, in Shakespeare's play), a *Te Deum* can be heard on the soundtrack. But in Branagh's *Henry V* this choral hymn of thanksgiving, beginning with the words "We praise thee, O God," takes on a grim irony less in light of the carnage we see (in a lengthy,

diagonal tracking shot, the camera follows the victorious yet stunned Henry as he carries the dead York across the battlefield, only to leave him at last and look out in long shot over an entire corpse-strewn landscape) than of the convulsion we know has taken place in the body politic and the providential design.

There are no scenes of battle-as-glory, then, in *Henry V*. War is as real as it can cinematically be made to appear in this film: savage, chaotic, claustrophobic; and what political glory may have derived from Henry's victory at Agincourt proved ultimately to be illusory. Branagh's *Henry V* is flawed, alas, but this nobly intended picture is worth seeing again and again, not least for its graphic battle sequences. Indeed, it may be the battle sequences of *Henry V* that in the end finally impress themselves most on our memories—as they never could on stage—since they alone are enough to remind us that, be the combatants English vs. French, German vs. American, or Asian vs. Caucasian, war makes equal, suffering, humble beasts of us all, no matter how glorious or ignoble the cause. For the royal Henry V, as for his plebeian men, the battlefield was ironically both the first and the last level field on which they would play. After battle, after life, would come the real judgment day—if not heaven's, then history's.

As for the besetting trouble of Shakespeare on film—the conflict between a work that lives in its language and a medium that tries to do without language as much as it can—Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* achieves, in its essentials, that difficult double feat that André Bazin once envisaged: it respects its theatrical original while also respecting its modern film idiom, and in such a way that, at its best, Branagh's vision and Shakespeare's coincide. Unlike Olivier, who used a theater-on-film or filmed-theater approach and whose *Henry V* thus becomes a genuine mixed-media event, Branagh opts as completely for the cinematic as the work will permit. But, despite his limitations as a heroic actor (modest voice, slight build, undistinguished face), he never subverts the size and majesty of the drama by trying to “modernize” it. He concentrates on trying to render that size and majesty in film terms; and, if we allow for a few constrictions along the way when the play seems to bump up against the microphone and the camera, Branagh does as well as anyone has ever done in making Shakespeare—not Shakespearean hash—filmic. (And he does better here, in my view, than in his subsequent *Much Ado about Nothing* [1993] and *Hamlet* [1996], both of which were marred by [American] lapses in casting, and the latter of which was updated to the second half of the nineteenth century for no discernible reason.)

Let me conclude this portion of my essay with a comparison between the openings of Branagh's and Olivier's films of *Henry V*, which seem to me to epitomize the divergent ways in which drama and film proceed to their respective ends. Olivier began with a panoramic shot of Elizabethan London, after which he focused on the Globe Theater and its bustle. Then out on stage came the costumed

Chorus (Leslie Banks). Branagh's Chorus (Derek Jacobi) throws a huge electrical switch and lights up an empty film studio as he moves through it. (In the whole picture he is the only one in modern dress.) Olivier began and continued with the metaphor of theater on film. Branagh, by contrast, makes us understand at once that his medium is film alone and that cinematic means, rather than transmutations of theater, will be his matter.

Olivier's own first entrance consisted of sliding his profile into place as the actor waited backstage at the Globe to go on. Branagh's first entrance is as king, not as actor. The great doors of the council chamber open, and the young monarch is revealed in silhouette against strong backlighting before he walks toward us. The camera deputizes for him, as if to suggest that in this production the camera will be king, courtiers bowing to it as it passes them. When Henry sits on his throne, we get the briefest glimpse of his face before we see the courtiers again; only then do we return for our first real look at him. This, I submit, is a purely cinematic entrance—of a singularly dramatic kind.

I'd like now to treat another Shakespearean adaptation by Kenneth Branagh: his film of *Love's Labour's Lost*. William Hazlitt himself dismissed this 1595 play: "If we were to part with any of the author's comedies, it should be this" (I, 240). But Harold Bloom has said: "I take more unmixed pleasure from this play than from any other Shakespearean play" (121). Branagh, if he had read this, might not agree entirely with Bloom but would certainly side with him against Hazlitt. He'd especially agree with a further Bloom comment on one of the characters: "The essence of Berowne is in that insouciant line uttered upon meeting a French lady-in-waiting in Navarre: 'Did not I dance with you in Brabant once?'" (124).

Lightning could have flashed in Branagh's head from Bloom's line to a way of performing Berowne to the concept of transforming the whole play into a "dance" film. *Love's Labour's Lost* did indeed become a Miramax musical-comedy film in 2000 with Branagh as adapter, as director, and as Berowne. The project was a promising possibility, not an instant sacrilege. The trouble is that the promise was not well kept.

The plot of the play, cunningly symmetrical, is so artificial—like some eighteenth-century operas (*Così fan tutte* [1790], for prime instance)—that the artificiality is part of the fun. The young King of Navarre decides to spend three years in isolated study and thought, with no women allowed into his life, and he enlists three of his courtiers, chief among them the ebullient Berowne, to immure themselves with him. When the Princess of France arrives to visit the King, she and her three ladies-in-waiting become a threat to his and his courtiers' isolation. The pastry-chef architecture of the play invites music. Surprisingly, only one operatic version has been attempted: Nicolas Nabokov composed it in 1973, with a libretto by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman. But of musical-comedy versions, even with

*Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) as precedent, there are none. (Note, however, W. S. Gilbert's relevance. He didn't use Shakespeare, but he reversed the play's idea and made the men invade the women's isolation in *Princess Ida* [1884].)

Branagh saw *Love's Labour's Lost* as "a romantic musical comedy," and he solved the problem of the score with what must now be called the Woody Allen device, after *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996). Branagh used old favorites, songs by Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and more. All of them are irresistible, and they are not anachronistic because he set the film in 1939. He commissioned Patrick Doyle, who had done all his previous Shakespeare music, to supply horn-rich interludes, which are like flowing gold between scenes.

The lovely songs warm us up, but they are not exactly the equivalent of Shakespeare's language—some of his most savory and delightful writing is in this play—at least two-thirds of which has been discarded. If Branagh was going to cut most of the lines to make room for the musical numbers, the numbers had to compensate us. They don't. The deficit arises less through the loss of the language, granted the idea of the project, than through two blatant producing mistakes. First, much of the casting is dull or dreadful, most notably the two leads, Alessandro Nivola as the King and Alicia Silverstone as the Princess: they are inadequate in every way. None of the principal eight is impressive except Branagh. Further, he has cast a member of the King's court with an actor who looks a good deal like the King, which is unhelpful. (There is one subtle touch in the casting: the King has one black courtier in his ensemble, the Princess one black lady-in-waiting. We expect that they are intended for each other; but they aren't.)

Second, actors who are not singers and dancers are asked to do a great deal of singing and dancing. Some of the singing may have been dubbed, but it is still un compelling. Timothy Spall, for instance, the burly man who was so winning in some Mike Leigh films, plays Don Armado, the Spanish *poseur*, and is assigned a Cole Porter song: he merely struggles to bring it into Shakespeare. The dancing is worse. There wouldn't have been any point in improving the trite choreography; these people can just about do what they were given. What is the point in asking an audience to watch long dance numbers executed by people who are not, so far as we can see, dancers? When Peter O'Toole, as a loony lord, burst into song and dance in *The Ruling Class* (1972), along with some of his townspeople, it was a bracing fracture of realism, and the pleasure was increased because none of these people were expected to be performers in the singing-dancing sense. But Branagh's actors are the cast of a musical comedy—that's what they are there for—and most of them just can't cut the mustard.

There are a few exceptions. Geraldine McEwan, who once captivated New York as Lady Teazle (in 1963) in *The School for Scandal* (1777) and who was Alice, the French lady-in-waiting, in Branagh's *Henry V*, here plays the schoolmistress Holoformia (Shakespeare's Holofores transgendered) with her imperishable wit

and charm. It is a treat to see McEwan tapping away and waving her arms as a member of the group backing up Nathan Lane in “There’s No Business Like Show Business.” And there’s Lane himself. He has become so smirkingly ubiquitous on small and large screens—was so even in 2000, when *Love’s Labour’s Lost* was released—that we are tempted to dislike his self-adoration. But there’s no doubting that, as Costard the clown, he fulfills the Elizabethan requisite. Many of Shakespeare’s clowns were written, it seems safe to say, for specific performers who could be trusted to make them funny. The roles were not intended for straight actors, however good, who were not intrinsically comic. (Remember Michael Keaton’s near hernia trying to be funny as Dogberry in Branagh’s film of *Much Ado about Nothing*?) Lane is funny. That’s what he starts from. Then he acts.

As for Branagh the Shakespearean, there is as yet no need to despair, even though he has not acted in another Shakespearean film since *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. (He directed but did not perform in a film of *As You Like It* in 2006.) After the death of John Gielgud in 2000, I cited Branagh as one hope for modern yet attuned Shakespearean acting. I still think so, and am waiting for more of it from him on the screen. (On the stage, in 2002 he starred at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield, as Richard III; in July 2013 he co-directed *Macbeth* and performed the title role at the Manchester International Festival, repeating his performance and directorial duties when the production moved to New York City’s Park Avenue Armory in June 2014; and, in April 2015, Branagh announced his formation of the Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company, with which he will present a season of five shows at London’s Garrick Theatre from October 2015 to November 2016, among them *The Winter’s Tale* [which he will direct and in which he will star] and *Romeo and Juliet* [which he will only direct].) In the patch that is left of Berowne’s lines, Branagh shows that he understands exactly what he is doing in Shakespeare and can do it with assurance. Mark, however, that he and all the others pronounce “can’t” and “dance” in American style, in what may be a bow to Yankee globalization.

Stanley Donen, the long-retired master director of musical films, is listed as a “presenter” of this picture. Perhaps it is the Donen presence that tickled Branagh into digging up some old Hollywood musical touches. Some examples: a swimming-pool ballet with a bunch of pretty girls; the Fred Astaire chair-tipping (while dancing, Branagh steps onto a chair, puts the other foot on the back of the chair, and tips it backward as part of the dance); the sky hooks that lift the King and his three courtiers during a number.

Shakespeare’s finish for the play is a refreshing conceit. The four men and the four women do not clinch and marry for a fade-out; their unions are postponed for a year, mostly to test their loves. Berowne says of this conclusion: “Our wooing doth not end like an old play. / Jack hath not Jill” (v.ii.851-852; 798-799). Branagh evidently felt that Shakespeare’s year of probation would be a tepid fade-out for a film, yet he didn’t want to lose the unconventionality of Jack’s not yet getting Jill.



So he throws in clips of the Second World War, in black and white, with some of the characters in some of the clips. Presumably this is why he set the film in 1939—so that he could “use” the Second World War as the cause of the delay in the four marriages. But it’s a somewhat grotesque choice for the finale of a spun-sugar musical. The cheeriest point to make about *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is that, spotty though it is (the spots are the good moments), it is not a complete collapse in Branagh’s career. It doesn’t signal decline, it displays mistakes—lots of them.

There is an ingenious touch in Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000), made only four years after Branagh’s own *Hamlet*. The duel scene near the finish always presents a staging problem: how to deal with the fact that Claudius doesn’t stop Gertrude from drinking the poison. In the text he simply says, aside, as she drinks: “It is the poisoned cup; it is too late” (V.ii.235; 1753). Why is it too late? Why couldn’t this clever schemer have found some way to stop her? Through the centuries, directors have tussled with this problem. But in this film Gertrude tells us, through her behavior, that she knows the cup is poisoned, and she deliberately drinks it down to save her son from drinking it. Only a slight hint beforehand suggests that she suspects Claudius of treachery, and she gets only a spot of pantomime to put the point across; still, this is a handy solution to the problem.

And it is all the more surprising here because, up to that point, this film, set in New York in 2000, hasn’t been particularly concerned with the difficulties in the text. Almereyda, the adapter-director, cannot have retained more than one-third of the lines, probably fewer. (The contest here is not for the crown of Denmark but for control of the Denmark Corporation in a skyscraper.) When a difficulty arose, Almereyda simply slashed lines to get rid of it. For instance, he wanted Hamlet to show his play-within-a-play on a videotape. What, then, to do about the visiting troupe of players? Eliminate them, of course.

The rearranging of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1601) is hardly a new idea. The role has been played by women (Sarah Bernhardt, for one, in 1899) and by a thirteen-year-old boy (William Betty at Drury Lane in 1805); every culture has molded it to its will; the film world embraced it even before the advent of sound. Through the centuries, modern-dress versions were frequent in the theater, and now Almereyda brings it into the twenty-first century. So here we have the old idea of Shakespeare updated, in decor and behavior. Many have compared this film to Aki Kaurismäki’s *Hamlet Goes Business* (1987), which I have not seen; I did see Ian McKellen’s fascist *Richard III* (1995) and Baz Luhrmann’s MTV *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), but, even without them, the modernizing of Shakespeare could hardly be shockingly novel. Rather, it feels somehow cozy to see that good old avant-garde approach once more, to see (in this case) Hamlet in a mod wool cap wandering in Manhattan, to see Polonius wiring Ophelia before the “nunnery” scene so that he and Claudius can hear what she and Hamlet say and so that Hamlet’s discovery of the wire is what sets him ranting.

The trouble is elsewhere: not that the director wanted to bring the play closer to the current audience but that he hasn't done so. Anyone who knows the play may get an occasional reminder of it; but anyone else will not get much hint of the depth of the characters and the magnitude of their drama. When we hear Ambroise Thomas's opera of *Hamlet* (1868), we know we are getting, not Shakespeare, but nineteenth-century Paris in all its plumpness. At Almereyda's *Hamlet*, we get not Shakespeare but East Village exhibitionistic coolness. Inevitably, the acting is seen through a distorting lens because the text is so shredded and re-arranged. In any case, Ethan Hawke was the perfect choice for this *Hamlet* because his slithering, mumbling approach fits the essentially off-hand feeling of this film. The director doesn't want any touch of the theater or of classical tradition in the performances—which is why the classically trained Liev Schreiber seems out of place as Laertes—and Hawke is precisely the person to let the (condensed) role leak out of him onto the screen. "To be, or not to be" (III.i.58-90; 1705-1706) by Hawke sounds just right when he mumbles (some of) it in a video shop. Julia Stiles, as Ophelia, is exactly the singles-bar girl who might go mad, which she does, at the Guggenheim Museum. Kyle MacLachlan and Diane Venora as the king and queen do what they can with their pre-shrunk roles, but it isn't even uphill all the way, it's a plateau. For those who don't know Bill Murray as a dry comic, his Polonius may seem like a last-minute substitution—as if a visitor to the set had been thrust into the part in an emergency so that they could get on with the shooting. The only person in the cast besides Schreiber who gives some sense of the size of the work that is here being battered is Sam Shepard (himself a noted playwright, of course) as the Ghost.

To level the most serious charge against this film, I dig up an old-fashioned term: beauty. Almereyda isn't interested in it. Of course, beauty is not in the post-modernist lexicon and, even without agreeing, we can understand. (I have seen elocutionary, attitudinizing, full productions of *Hamlet* that were suffocating.) But this play survives—reigns—because of its beauty, not the abstract profundity of its themes or the universality of its mysteries in themselves, but the beauty of the way in which they are expressed. *Hamlet* exists because of, and through its, language. ("Absent thee from felicity a while" [V.ii.289; 1755] has my vote as the loveliest line of verse in the English language.) Yes, the play is almost always condensed a bit in performance—Branagh retained too much in his film—but to rip out great chunks because they do not fit a director's design is like altering a giant's robe for a pygmy. To mash the language as an obstacle that must be cleared away for the modern audience is to cheat that audience. Only Schreiber and Shepard show some glimpse of this truth.

Watching this film is only to watch for Almereyda's gimmicks. (Much of his career has been in science fiction.) These do pop up fairly steadily: for example, Hamlet gets his invitation to the duel not from Osric but from a fax. But this

sort of cleverness is self-reflexive. When in 1988 Peter Sellars put his staging of *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786) in an apartment atop the Trump Tower, he left the music alone, thus the production had some added wryness through the contextual change for Mozart—true Mozart. But Almereyda's film is only an attempt by a director to utilize *Hamlet* for personal display—at Shakespeare's expense. It has mildly entertaining moments, but that's all.

Julie Taymor, for her part, is a unique American designer: adventurous, humorous, exciting. I first saw her work in 1980, in Elizabeth Swados's theater production of *The Haggadah* (the Jewish text that sets forth the order of the Passover Seder), for which Taymor did sets, costumes, masks, and giant puppets that made the whole work epic and *gemütlich* at the same time. She is also an experienced director, in opera as well as theater, and some think that directing is her chief talent. I missed her 1994 New York production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1592), but I have seen some of her other work. When I heard that she was to make her first full-length film, I thought that the film world was lucky.

Not with this picture, though. *Titus* (1999) is a thesis, unproven. Taymor believes that Shakespeare's earliest tragedy (if it is entirely by him) is especially apt at this time. The story involves murder, rape, and maiming (hands lopped off) in ancient Rome, a story that she seeks to put in place as a comment on the daily data of television. To emphasize modern relevance, she begins with a modern boy in a modern kitchen who is swept back into the past as eyewitness (though he virtually disappears once he gets there), and we see modern artifacts throughout: tanks, trucks, motorcycles. But Taymor's rendering of the play is so remote and cold, so disjointed, so devoid of Shakespearean current and surge, that the result is a sequence of fragments. They don't build to unity, let alone resonate against modern brutalities.

Titus is a Roman conqueror who brings Tamora, the queen of the Goths, and her sons as captives back to Rome. Titus has one of Tamora's sons executed, thus unleashing the queen's revenge that rages through the play. It is not only difficult to follow the story in Taymor's screenplay, it is difficult to respond with either a sense of tragic fall or low-level shock. Attempts have occasionally been made by theater people and Shakespearean critics to install *Titus Andronicus* in the high Shakespearean pantheon, but nothing that happens in this film adequately counters T. S. Eliot's view that this is "one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written" (82). [Even Gustav Cross, in the Pelican edition, begins his introduction: "*Titus Andronicus* is a ridiculous play" (823).]

Taymor knows all this and meant to disprove it. But her best result is in distancing the gory absurdities so far that the play seems too abstract to be ridiculous. I don't understand, however, why such a superlative designer as Taymor wanted others to do the sets and costumes. Dante Ferretti and Milena Canonero are proven talents, but this production seems to be taking place in ill-lit railway

terminals and football stadiums after hours. Why didn't Taymor do the designs herself? It might at least have made the film more visually engaging.

The film's main asset is Anthony Hopkins's performance as Titus; yet it can hardly be called a performance. Hopkins, magnificently equipped for the role, is so burdened with directorial maneuver that he cannot fulfill his design. Outstanding in inadequacy among the others is Jessica Lange, as the vindictive queen; regality and savagery are not within Lange's grasp. The one competent actor in the cast besides Hopkins is Harry J. Lennix, who is Aaron: Lennix is incisive, with cool diabolical pride in his evildoing. This character, by the way, is one of Shakespeare's three Moors: besides Othello, there is the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* (1597).

A film of *The Merchant of Venice*, in fact, came along in 2004, inevitably raising all the old questions about Shakespearean adaptation—and more. This is Michael Radford's film, not Shakespeare's play. The screen adaptation is by Radford, with the text pared: as is often the case in Shakespearean adaptation, much of the verbal embroidery is discarded but also some of the verbal delights. This condensation has provided Radford with chances for lots of late-sixteenth-century Venetian revelry—bare-breasted wenches are plentiful—and Venetian vistas. What Radford has retained of the original, he treats warmly and intelligently, and with a few welcome surprises in the acting. But he has produced a different work, moderately successful in itself, out of materials provided by Shakespeare.

Chief among the pleasant surprises is Al Pacino's Shylock. With Pacino's past in mind, we might have expected that he would make the sulphurous most of the role's raging moments. (I remember George C. Scott in the my-ducats-and-my-daughter speech from a 1962 New York theater production: as a teenager at the time, I thought he had literally gone crazy.) Pacino, presumably with Radford's guidance, in the main does otherwise. Excellently made up and costumed, he takes the part inward and makes it tight, bitten, soul-scarred—a man rather than a collection of scenes. Lynn Collins is an admirable Portia, womanly yet commanding. Joseph Fiennes is skillful enough as Bassanio, though he doesn't have the charm that would make Portia long for his return. A particular prize is Jeremy Irons' Antonio. With his first moment, the play's first line—"In sooth, I know not why I am so sad" (I.i.1; 1090)—he is immersed in middle-aged, virtually inexplicable melancholy. Graceful touches abound: for instance, when Shylock is preparing the bond for Antonio's signature and can't think of a forfeit, or pretends it, and finally proposes the pound of flesh, a small surprised smile crosses Antonio's face at the absurdity of the idea.

Radford pays sufficient attention to the much-bruited view of the Antonio-Bassanio friendship as homoerotic. To establish one aspect of Bassanio, we first see him frivolling with some women, but then we also see him and Antonio kiss goodbye when they part to look for money. That money is to finance Bassanio's

pursuit of a wealthy wife in Belmont. The question as to why Antonio risks his life to finance his close friend's (romantic) departure is answered at the very end with a hint that Bassanio's marriage may not exclude Antonio's love.

But one prominent component of the play simply wobbles in the film. As many have noted, *The Merchant of Venice* sets the harrowing story of Shylock against the romantic comedy of Bassanio and Portia. In the theater, the contrast can be affecting. On screen those comedic elements simply look phony. The camera, cruelly veristic, turns them into papier-mâché. First, the device of the three caskets by which Portia chooses a husband, a device in which Freud found symbolic depths, seems dully mechanical when thrust at us by the camera. Second, Bassanio's failure to recognize his newly-wed wife in the courtroom just because she has put on a lawyer's gown (and here a fake moustache) is a theater convention that works with theater distances but not in film close-ups. Then there is the ring that Bassanio has promised Portia to wear forever and which he has given to the lawyer. (This ring plot also includes a parallel with a friend of his.) With this last-minute ring mix-up, Shakespeare was clearly trying to restore the key of romantic comedy to his play after the grim trial scene. It can sometimes work on stage. Here, put into our laps (so to speak), it just makes us wish for the film to end.

A much more grave problem accompanies this play, unique in the whole Shakespeare canon. Harold Bloom, the eminent Shakespearean, again puts it strongly: "One would have to be blind, deaf, and dumb not to recognize that Shakespeare's grand, equivocal comedy *The Merchant of Venice* is nevertheless a profoundly anti-Semitic work" (171). It took two hundred years before Shylock was played as anything other than a stock Jewish buffoon-villain. Subsequently, great actors such as Kean, Booth, and Irving portrayed him as a tragic figure—and tailored the play to fit this view. Critics, too, have tried to make this case, attempting to exculpate the author. But no amount of wishful thinking can shift this play from the social attitudes of the author's day into Shylock's tragedy. The best that can be said here in defense of the greatest writer who ever lived is that he gave his Jew a character and a rationale.

In our time, specifically the post-Holocaust era, the play has entered a changed atmosphere. John Gross, in his magisterial study *Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, states the matter calmly and well: "[*The Merchant of Venice*] can never seem quite the same again. It is still a masterpiece; but there is a permanent chill in the air, even in the gardens of Belmont" (352). Radford's film, lithe and lively though it often is, cannot quite escape that chill.

Speaking of a different kind of chill: in the midst of the action of a 1999 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck stops to urinate. And this is not even the low point of the cinematic venture. Michael Hoffman adapted the play to the screen and directed it. Hoffman's dossier includes, among other pictures, a bright

modern comedy-romance, *One Fine Day* (1996), and a heavy period drama, *Restoration* (1995). Much of the time, his version of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) is almost a contest between these two types. But this contest is swallowed in a larger struggle that, scene by scene, foot by foot, ensnares most films of Shakespeare, a struggle that might as well be inscribed on the screen as a supertitle: "Please, audience! We know it's Shakespeare; but see how we're trying to keep it from being dull?"

Very few Shakespeare films have been free of this subtext—most notably, Branagh's work—but Branagh's passion for the plays, and his experience with them, flowed from the stage onto the screen to produce new incarnations rather than cultural obeisance by movies to classics. And, for the most part, Branagh was supported by actors who relished the chance to do in a new form what they had always loved doing; they weren't entering a strange, intimidating obstacle race.

This new film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* shows no sign of the (let's call it) Branagh attitude. It seems, though of course this is supposition, that Hoffman and his producers, after deciding to film the play, surely out of love for it, faced the frightening fact—revealed in that invisible supertitle—that they were actually daring to put Shakespeare on film. Then they had to face another present-day stern injunction about Shakespeare that applies either on stage or film: to *do* something to the play, and first, obviously, to the setting. Who would care about a film set in and near ancient Athens? Even Shakespeare's Elizabethanized ancient Athens? Damned few. Where to set it, then? Among foreign countries—and it had to be abroad—which was the most "in"? No question: Italy. And which part of Italy? Again, no question: Tuscany. And what about all the references to Athens in the text? Simple: they invented a Tuscan town called Monte Athena. (Many of the exteriors were actually shot in Montepulciano, which, incidentally, was Henry James's favorite town in Tuscany.) As for the magic wood, they couldn't possibly use a real forest, because they needed room to maneuver people and cameras. Seemingly, they remembered the magic wood that Max Reinhardt had constructed for his 1937 Hollywood *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and they tried for an equivalent studio job—ponds and lakes and towering trees. Then they apparently remembered Peter Brook's 1971 theater production and gave Titania a suspended leafy bed.

Next, the costumes: modern clothes would jar the mood, yet doublet and hose and hoop skirts and perukes would distance the action from the audience. Perhaps someone remembered A. J. Antoon's fine production of *Much Ado About Nothing* (1599) in New York's Central Park in 1972 (preserved on tape), which was costumed in clothes from 1900. The turn of the century was far enough back to support romance, yet close enough so that the suits and dresses looked something like our clothes and would feel "comfortable" to us. Then there were all those cute 1900 props you could bring in—big gramophone horns, bicycles.



The fleeing lovers on bicycles in the woods—oh, the possible gimmicks to divert the audience's impatience with verse! Hoffman kept grabbing at diversions, with a shrug for overall directorial design.

About his adaptation of the play, we can only sigh at the necessities. Naturally, once again many of the long speeches were condensed (even as some of them are usually condensed in the theater), and naturally anyone who knows the play will wonder why one passage was retained and another shrunk or omitted, or why some matters were added. (Chief curiosity: Nick Bottom was given a shrewish wife, whose few lines are in Italian.) But this adaptation, though a thing of shreds and patches, could have been made to work—shorn of the desperate gimmickry.

And with a different cast. Two of the actors are pleasingly secure: Rupert Everett, as Oberon, gives the fairy king otherworldly ease; Dominic West gives the lovelorn Lysander clarity and verve. Then comes a string of mediocrities. Michelle Pfeiffer, as Titania, makes the fairy queen sound like Beverly Hills in space: she is not unintelligent, but her speech is out of key. Calista Flockhart, as Helena, and Anna Friel, as her unintended rival in love, Hermia, both strive hard, and so does Christian Bale, the Demetrius, but all three give the impression that they are wrestling with Shakespeare rather than fulfilling their roles. If the director wanted a wry Puck whose arteries are beginning to harden (though why fairies should age is not explained), then Stanley Tucci was the right man. Two of the cast are disasters. David Strathairn, supposedly the mighty Theseus, looks and sounds like a bond salesman who has strayed in from a costume party. Sophie Marceau, very pretty, cannot speak English well enough to handle even the few lines that are left to Hippolyta.

But the prime catastrophe is the man who is probably the best actor in the cast. What in the name of heaven (or Avon) is Kevin Kline doing in the role of Nick Bottom? Kline is one of the most clever, keen, technically polished comedians currently on the screen or stage—therefore an actor thoroughly capable of moving us to tears as well as laughs—but what is he doing as one of the “rude mechanicals,” the proles who have banded together to put on a play? Possibly Hoffman thought it would be good to have an attractive figure of a man as Titania's dream lover, even with an ass's head, but when Bottom, the alleged weaver, joins the tinker and tailor and bellows-mender in rehearsal, he looks like a slick director who has been hired to stage a labor-union show. Kline has no trace of the boisterous, big-hearted, stage-struck amateur. “Bottom is Shakespeare's Everyman,” says Harold Bloom (150), who sees him as a predecessor of Falstaff. Kevin Kline? No Shakespearean way. (A puzzle: Bottom appears for his first scene in a spiffy three-piece suit. Two pranksters pour bottles of wine on him from above, and he accepts the act as a small annoyance. This man?)

Lastly, the music: another odd mixture. We hear Mendelssohn at the start, naturally, and later, too. But along the way we get the *brindisi* from Verdi's *La*

*Traviata* (1853) for no relevant reason, and even more oddly we get—twice, in amorous scenes—“Casta diva” from Bellini’s *Norma* (1831). Since the first words of the aria mean “chaste goddess” and chastity is not the mood of the moment, are we hovering on the edge of a recondite joke?

There’s a very valuable stage history of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* called *Our Moonlight Revels*. The author, Gary Jay Williams, says on the first page of the book’s Prologue: “My primary interest throughout this performance history has been to understand each major production in its cultural moment.” (For instance, he says of Peter Brook’s production, which arrived just at the end of the swinging ’60s, that its “appeal lay largely in its celebration of its own youthful, aggressive contemporary engagement with Shakespeare and the possibility of *communitas*, which it promised in its curtain-call lovefest” [233]). Trying to apply the Williams criterion to this film, I can discern only a blend of ambition and fear. Hoffman and the producers self-evidently responded to the play’s enchantment, but they also self-evidently didn’t quite know for whom they were making the picture, didn’t sense a “cultural moment”; so, in a sort of aesthetic trepidation, they put in everything they could think of—Bottom’s wife, the bicycles, etc. The result is a film that, unlike Brook’s production, is constantly searching for its audience.

The worst thing about this 1999 film of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, unlike the films by Almereyda, Taymor, and Radford, is that it takes the idea of Shakespeare on film back to where it was—before Branagh. Taymor’s *The Tempest* (2010) and Almereyda’s *Cymbeline* (2014) would be yet to come . . .

### Films Reviewed

*Love’s Labour’s Lost* (2000, 93 minutes), directed and scripted by Kenneth Branagh; cinematography by Alex Thompson; editing by Neil Farrell; music by Patrick Doyle; with Kenneth Branagh, Nathan Lane, Adrian Lester, Matthew Lillard, Natascha McElhone, Alessandro Nivola, Alicia Silverstone, and Timothy Spall.

*Hamlet* (2000, 112 minutes), directed and scripted by Michael Almereyda; cinematography by John de Borman; editing by Kristina Boden; music by Carter Burwell; with Ethan Hawke, Kyle MacLachlan, Diane Venora, Liev Schreiber, Julia Stiles, Bill Murray, Karl Geary, Steve Zahn, and Sam Shepard.

*Titus* (1999, 162 minutes), directed and scripted by Julie Taymor; cinematography by Luciano Tovoli; editing by Françoise Bonnot; music by Elliot Goldenthal; with Anthony Hopkins, Jessica Lange, Alan Cumming, Colm Feore, James Frain, Laura Fraser, Harry J. Lennix, Angus Macfadyen, Matthew Rhys, and Jonathan Rhys Meyers.

*The Merchant of Venice* (2004, 138 minutes), directed and scripted by Michael Radford; cinematography by Benoît Delhomme; editing by Lucia Zucchetti;

music by Jocelyn Pook; with Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes, and Lynn Collins.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999, 116 minutes), directed and scripted by Michael Hoffman; cinematography by Oliver Stapleton; editing by Garth Craven; music by Simon Boswell; with Kevin Kline, Stanley Tucci, Calista Flockhart, Anna Friel, Christian Bale, Dominic West, David Strathairn, Sophie Marceau, Roger Rees, Max Wright, Gregory Jbara, Bill Irwin, Sam Rockwell, Bernard Hill, and John Sessions.

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## FILM CREDITS AND DIRECTORS' FEATURE FILMOGRAPHIES

### ***The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919)**

Director: Robert Wiene

Screenplay: Carl Mayer, Hans Janowitz

Cinematographer: Willy Hameister

Music: Giuseppe Becce

Production Designers: Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, Walter Röhrig

Costume Designer: Walter Reimann

Running time: 90 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white (originally tinted in green, brown, and steely blue); silent

Cast: Werner Krauss (Dr. Caligari), Conrad Veidt (Caesar), Friedrich Feher (Francis), Lil Dagover (Jane), Hans Heinz von Twardowski (Alan), Rudolf Lettinger (Dr. Olson), Rudolph Klein-Rogge (A criminal), Hans Lanser-Rudolf, Henri Peters-Arnolds, Ludwig Rex, Elsa Wagner

### **Robert Wiene (1873-1938)**

*He This Way, She That Way* (1915)

*The Canned Bride* (1915)

*The Queen's Love Letter* (1916)

*The Queen's Secretary* (1916)

*Lehmann's Honeymoon* (1916)

*The Robber Bride* (1916)

*The Wandering Light* (1916)

*Frau Eva* (1916)

*Steadfast Benjamin* (1916)

*The Man in the Mirror* (1917)

*Fear* (1917)

*Life Is a Dream* (1917)

*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919)



*The Night of Queen Isabeau* (1920)  
*Genuine* (1920)  
*The Three Dances of Mary Wilford* (1920)  
*Panic in the House of Ardon* (1920)  
*A Woman's Revenge* (1921)  
*The Infernal Power* (1922)  
*Raskolnikow* (1923)  
*The Doll Maker of Kiang-Ning* (1923)  
*I.N.R.I.* (1923)  
*The Hands of Orlac* (1924)  
*Boarding House Groonen* (1925)  
*The Guardsman* (1925)  
*Der Rosenkavalier* (1925)  
*The Queen of Moulin Rouge* (1926)  
*The Famous Woman* (1927)  
*The Mistress* (1927)  
*The Great Adventuress* (1928)  
*Folly of Love* (1928)  
*The Woman on the Rack* (1928)  
*The Other* (1930)  
*The Prosecutor Hallers* (1930)  
*The Love Express* (1931)  
*Typhoon* (1933)  
*One Night in Venice* (1934)  
*Ultimatum* (1938)

### ***Way Down East* (1920)**

Director: D. W. Griffith

Screenplay: Anthony Paul Kelly, elaborated by D. W. Griffith, from the 1897 play by Lottie Blair Parker, Joseph R. Grismer, and William A. Brady

Cinematographers: G. W. "Billy" Bitzer, Hendrik Sartov

Editors: James Smith, Rose Smith

Music: Louis Silvers, William F. Peters (the film was re-released in 1931 with a musical soundtrack)

Art Directors: Charles O. Seessel, Clifford Pember

Costume Designer: Lady Duff Gordon, O'Kane Conwell

Running time: 150 minutes; re-issued at 110 minutes

Format: 35 mm, in black and white; silent

Cast: Lillian Gish (Anna Moore), Richard Barthelmess (David Bartlett), Lowell Sherman (Lennox Sanderson), Burt McIntosh (Squire Bartlett), Kate Bruce (Mother

Bartlett), Mary Hay (Kate, the Squire's niece), Creighton Hale (The Professor), Emily Fitzroy (Maria Poole, the landlady), Porter Strong (Seth Holcomb), George Neville (The Constable), Edgar Nelson (Hi Holler), Morgan Belmont (Diana Tremont), Josephine Bernard (Mrs. Tremont), Mrs. David Landau (Anna Moore's mother), Viva Ogden (Martha Perkins), Florence Short (the eccentric aunt)

**D. W. Griffith (1875-1948)**

*Judith of Bethulia* (1914)  
*The Battle of the Sexes* (1914)  
*Home, Sweet Home* (1914)  
*The Avenging Conscience* (1914)  
*The Birth of a Nation* (1915)  
*Intolerance* (1916)  
*Hearts of the World* (1918)  
*The Great Love* (1918)  
*The Greatest Thing in Life* (1918)  
*A Romance of Happy Valley* (1919)  
*The Girl Who Stayed at Home* (1919)  
*Broken Blossoms* (1919)  
*True Heart Susie* (1919)  
*The Mother and the Law* (1919)  
*Scarlet Days* (1919)  
*The Greatest Question* (1919)  
*The Idol Dancer* (1920)  
*The Love Flower* (1920)  
*Way Down East* (1920)  
*Dream Street* (1921)  
*Orphans of the Storm* (1921)  
*One Exciting Night* (1922)  
*The White Rose* (1923)  
*America* (1924)  
*Isn't Life Wonderful* (1924)  
*Sally of the Sawdust* (1925)  
*That Royle Girl* (1925)  
*The Sorrows of Satan* (1926)  
*Drums of Love* (1928)  
*The Battle of the Sexes* (1928)  
*Lady of the Pavements* (1929)  
*Abraham Lincoln* (1930)  
*The Struggle* (1931)

### ***The Gold Rush* (1925)**

Director: Charles Chaplin

Screenplay: Charles Chaplin

Cinematographer: Roland H. Totheroh

Editor: Charles Chaplin

Music: Charles Chaplin (the film was re-released in 1942 with a musical soundtrack and Chaplin's narration)

Production Designer: Charles D. Hall

Running time: 82 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white; silent

Cast: Charles Chaplin (The Lone Prospector), Mack Swain (Big Jim McKay), Tom Murray (Black Larsen), Georgia Hale (Georgia), Malcolm Waite (Jack Cameron), Henry Bergman (Hank Curtis), Stanley Sanford (Barman), Barbara Pierce (Manicurist), "Daddy" Taylor (Ancient Dancing Prospector); Betty Morrissey, Kay Desleys, Joan Lowell (Georgia's Friends); John Rand, Albert Austin, Heine Conklin, Allan Garcia, Tom Wood (Prospectors); A. J. O'Connor, Art Walker (Officers)

### **Charles Chaplin (1889-1977)**

*The Kid* (1921)

*A Woman of Paris* (1923)

*The Gold Rush* (1925)

*The Circus* (1928)

*City Lights* (1931)

*Modern Times* (1936)

*The Great Dictator* (1940)

*Monsieur Verdoux* (1947)

*Limelight* (1952)

*A King in New York* (1957)

*A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967)

### ***The Rules of the Game* (1939)**

Director: Jean Renoir

Screenplay: Jean Renoir, Camille François, Carl Koch

Cinematography: Jean Bachelet

Editor: Marguerite Houlet-Renoir

Music: Pierre-Alexandre Monsigny, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Roger Desormières (arranger and conductor)

Production Designer: Eugène Lourié

Costume Designer: Coco Chanel

Running time: 110 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white

Cast: Marcel Dalio (Robert de la Chesnaye), Nora Grégor (Christine de la Chesnaye), Roland Toutain (André Jurieu), Jean Renoir (Octave), Mila Parély (Geneviève), Paulette Dubost (Lisette), Gaston Modot (Schumacher), Julien Carette (Marceau), Anne Mayen (Jackie), Pierre Nay (Saint-Aubin), Pierre Magnier (The General), Odette Talazac (Charlotte), Roger Forster (The Homosexual), Richard Francoeur (La Bruyère), Claire Gérard (Madame de la Bruyère), Tony Corteggiani (Berthelin), Nicolas Amato (The South American), Eddie Debray (Corneille), Lisa Elina (The Radio Announcer), André Zwoboda (The Engineer), Léon Larive (The Chef), Henri Cartier-Bresson (The English Domestic)

### **Jean Renoir (1894-1979)**

*La Fille de l'eau* (*Whirlpool of Fate*, 1924)

*Nana* (1926)

*Charleston* (1927)

*Marquitta* (1927)

*The Little Match Girl* (1928)

*Tire au flanc* (*The Sad Sack*, 1928)

*Le Tournoidans la cité* (*The Tournament*, 1928)

*Le Bled* (*The Boondocks*, 1929)

*On purge bébé* (*Baby's Laxative*, 1931)

*La Chienne* (*The Bitch*, 1931)

*Night at the Crossroads* (1932)

*Boudu Saved from Drowning* (1932)

*Chotard & Co.* (1933)

*Madame Bovary* (1933)

*Toni* (1935)

*Le Crime de M. Lange* (*The Crime of Monsieur Lange*, 1936)

*Life Belongs to Us*, a.k.a. *People of France* (1936)

*The Lower Depths* (1936)

*A Day in the Country* (1937; final cut, 1946)

*Grand Illusion* (1937)

*La Marseillaise* (1938)

*The Human Beast* (1938)

*The Rules of the Game* (1939)

*Swamp Water* (1941)

*This Land Is Mine* (1943)

*Salute to France* (1944)

*The Southerner* (1945)

*The Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946)

*The Woman on the Beach* (1947)

*The River* (1951)  
*The Golden Coach* (1953)  
*French Cancan* (1955)  
*Elena and Her Men* (1956)  
*Le Testament du Docteur Cordelier* (*Experiment in Evil*, 1959)  
*Picnic on the Grass* (1959)  
*The Elusive Corporal* (1962)  
*The Little Theatre of Jean Renoir* (1969)

***Citizen Kane* (1941)**

Director: Orson Welles

Screenplay: Herman J. Mankiewicz, Orson Welles, John Houseman

Cinematographer: Gregg Toland

Editors: Robert Wise, Mark Robson

Music: Bernard Herrmann

Art Directors: Van Nest Polglaise, Perry Ferguson

Costume Designer: Edward Stevenson

Running time: 119 minutes

Format: 35 mm, in black and white

Cast: Orson Welles (Charles Foster Kane), Joseph Cotten (Jedediah Leland), Everett Sloane (Bernstein), Dorothy Comingore (Susan Alexander), Ray Collins (Jim Getty), William Alland (Jerry Thompson/Newsreel Narrator), Agnes Moorehead (Mary Kane), Ruth Warrick (Emily Norton), George Coulouris (Walter Parks Thatcher), Erskine Sandford (Herbert Carter), Harry Shannon (Jim Kane, Kane's father), Philip Van Zandt (Rawlston), Paul Stewart (Raymond), Fortunio Bonanova (Signor Matiste), Georgia Backus (Curator of Thatcher Library), Irving Mitchell (Dr. Corey), Edith Evanson (Nurse)

**Orson Welles (1915-85)**

*Citizen Kane* (1941)  
*The Magnificent Ambersons* (1941)  
*The Stranger* (1946)  
*The Lady from Shanghai* (1947)  
*Macbeth* (1948)  
*Othello* (1952)  
*Mr. Arkadin* (1955)  
*Touch of Evil* (1958)  
*The Trial* (1962)  
*Chimes at Midnight* (1965)  
*The Immortal Story* (1968)

### ***Tokyo Story* (1953)**

Director: Yasujiro Ozu

Screenplay: Kogo Noda, Yasujiro Ozu

Cinematographer: Yuharu Atsuta

Editor: Yoshiyasu Hamamura

Music: Kojun Saitô

Production Designers: Tatsuo Hamada, Itsuo Takahashi

Costume Designer: Taizo Saito

Running time: 136 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white

Cast: Chishu Ryu (Shukishi Hirayama), Chieko Higashiyama (Tomi Hirayama), Setsuko Hara (Noriko Hirayama), Haruko Sugimura (Shige Kaneko), So Yamamura (Koichi Hirayama), Kuniko Miyake (Fumiko Hirayama, his wife), Kyoko Kagawa (Kyoko Hirayama), Eijiro Tono (Sanpei Numata), Nobuo Nakamura (Kurazo Kaneko), Shiro Osaka (Keiso Hirayama), Hisao Toake (Osamu Hattori), Teruko Nagaoka (Yone Hattori)

### **Yasujiro Ozu (1903-63)**

*Days of Youth* (1929)

*I Graduated, But . . .* (1929)

*A Straightforward Boy* (1929)

*Walk Cheerfully* (1930)

*I Flunked, But . . .* (1930)

*That Night's Wife* (1930)

*The Lady and the Beard* (1931)

*Tokyo Chorus* (1931)

*I Was Born, But . . .* (1932)

*Where Now Are the Dreams of Youth?* (1932)

*Woman of Tokyo* (1933)

*Dragnet Girl* (1933)

*Passing Fancy* (1933)

*A Mother Should Be Loved* (1934)

*Story of Floating Weeds* (1934)

*An Inn in Tokyo* (1935)

*The Only Son* (1936)

*What Did the Lady Forget?* (1937)

*Brothers And Sisters of the Toda Family* (1941)

*There Was a Father* (1942)

*Record of a Tenement Gentleman* (1947)

*A Hen in the Wind* (1948)

*Late Spring* (1949)



*The Munekata Sisters* (1950)  
*Early Summer* (1951)  
*The Flavor of Green Tea over Rice* (1952)  
*Tokyo Story* (1953)  
*Early Spring* (1956)  
*Tokyo Twilight* (1957)  
*Equinox Flower* (1958)  
*Good Morning* (1959)  
*Floating Weeds* (1959)  
*Late Autumn* (1960)  
*End of Summer* (1961)  
*An Autumn Afternoon* (1962)

***I vitelloni* (1953)**

Director: Federico Fellini  
Screenplay: Federico Fellini, Ennio Flaiano, Tullio Pinelli  
Cinematographers: Carlo Carlini, Otello Martelli, Luciano Trasatti  
Editor: Rolando Benedetti  
Music: Nino Rota  
Production Designer: Mario Chiari  
Costume Designer: Margherita Marinari  
Running time: 104 minutes  
Format: 35mm, in black and white  
Cast: Franco Interlenghi (Moraldo Rubini), Alberto Sordi (Alberto), Franco Fabrizi (Fausto Moretti), Leopoldo Trieste (Leopoldo Vannucci), Riccardo Fellini (Riccardo), Eleonora Ruffo (Sandra Rubini), Jean Brochard (Francesco Moretti), Claude Farrell (Olga), Carlo Romano (Michele Curti), Enrico Viarisio (Signor Rubini), Paolo Borboni (Signora Rubini), Lida Baarowa (Giulia Curti), Arlette Sauvage (Woman in the Cinema), Vira Silenti (Gisella), Maja Nipora (Caterina), Achille Majeroni (Sergio Natali), Guido Martufi (Guido), Silvio Bagolini (Giudizio), Milvia Chianelli (Riccardo's Friend)

**Federico Fellini (1920-93)**

*Variety Lights* (1950)  
*The White Sheik* (1952)  
*I vitelloni* (*The Young and the Passionate*, 1953)  
*La strada* (*The Road*, 1954)  
*Il bidone* (*The Swindle*, 1955)  
*The Nights of Cabiria* (1957)  
*La dolce vita* (*The Sweet Life*, 1959)  
8½ (1963)

*Juliet of the Spirits* (1965)  
*Fellini Satyricon* (1969)  
*The Clowns* (1970)  
*Roma* (1972)  
*Amarcord (I Remember)*, 1973)  
*Casanova* (1976)  
*Orchestra Rehearsal* (1979)  
*City of Women* (1980)  
*And the Ship Sails On* (1983)  
*Ginger and Fred* (1985)  
*Intervista (Interview)*, 1987)  
*The Voice of the Moon* (1990)

***Hiroshima, mon amour* (1959)**

Director: Alain Resnais

Screenplay: Marguerite Duras

Cinematographers: Michio Takahashi, Sacha Vierny

Editors: Jasmine Chasney, Henri Colpi, Anne Sarraute

Music: Georges Delerue, Giovanni Fusco

Production Designers: Minoru Esaka, Mayo (a.k.a. Antoine Malliarakis), Lucilla Mussini

Costume Designer: Gérard Collery

Running time: 90 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white

Cast: Emmanuelle Riva (She), Eiji Okada (He), Bernard Fresson (German Lover), Stella Dassas (Mother), Pierre Barbaud (Father)

**Alain Resnais (1922-2014)**

*Night and Fog* (1955)

*Hiroshima, mon amour (Hiroshima, My Love)*, 1959)

*Last Year at Marienbad* (1961)

*Muriel* (1963)

*La guerre est finie (The War Is Over)*, 1966)

*Je t'aime, je t'aime (I Love You, I Love You)*, 1968)

*Stavisky* (1974)

*Providence* (1977)

*Mon oncle d'Amérique (My American Uncle)*, 1980)

*Life Is a Bed of Roses* (1983)

*Love unto Death* (1984)

*Mélo* (1986)

*I Want to Go Home* (1989)

*Smoking/No Smoking* (1993)  
*Same Old Song* (1997)  
*Not on the Lips* (2003)  
*Private Fears in Public Places* (2006)  
*Wild Grass* (2009)  
*You Ain't Seen Nothin' Yet!* (2012)  
*Life of Riley* (2014)

***Winter Light* (1962)**

Director: Ingmar Bergman  
Screenplay: Ingmar Bergman  
Cinematographer: Sven Nykvist  
Editor: Ulla Ryghe  
Music: Evald Andersson  
Production Designer: P. A. Lundgren  
Costume Designer: Mago (a.k.a. Max Goldstein)  
Running time: 81 minutes  
Format: 35mm, in black and white  
Cast: Ingrid Thulin (Märtha Lundberg, Schoolteacher), Gunnar Björnstrand (Tomas Ericsson, Pastor), Gunnel Lindblom (Karin Persson), Max von Sydow (Jonas Persson), Allan Edwall (Algot Frövik, Sexton), Kolbjörn Knudsen (Knut Aronsson, Warden), Olof Thunberg (Fredrik Blom, Organist), Elsa Ebbesen (Magdalena Ledfors, Widow)

**Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007)**

*Crisis* (1946)  
*It Rains on Our Love* (1946)  
*A Ship Bound for India* (1947)  
*Music in Darkness* (1948)  
*Port of Call* (1948)  
*The Devil's Wanton*, a.k.a. *Prison* (1949)  
*Thirst* (1949)  
*To Joy* (1950)  
*This Can't Happen Here* (1950)  
*Summer Interlude* (1951)  
*Secrets of Women* (1952)  
*Summer with Monika* (1953)  
*Sawdust and Tinsel* (1953)  
*The Naked Night* (1953)  
*A Lesson in Love* (1954)  
*Dreams* (1955)

*Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955)  
*The Seventh Seal* (1957)  
*Wild Strawberries* (1957)  
*Brink of Life* (1958)  
*The Magician* (1958)  
*The Virgin Spring* (1960)  
*The Devil's Eye* (1960)  
*Through a Glass Darkly* (1961)  
*Winter Light* (1962)  
*The Silence* (1963)  
*All These Women* (1964)  
*Persona* (1966)  
*Hour of the Wolf* (1968)  
*Shame* (1968)  
*The Rite* (1969)  
*The Passion of Anna* (1969)  
*The Touch* (1971)  
*Cries and Whispers* (1972)  
*Scenes From a Marriage* (1973)  
*The Magic Flute* (1975)  
*Face to Face* (1976)  
*The Serpent's Egg* (1977)  
*Autumn Sonata* (1978)  
*From the Life of the Marionettes* (1980)  
*Fanny and Alexander* (1982)  
*After the Rehearsal* (1984)  
*Saraband* (2003)

***The Fiancés* (1963)**

Director: Ermanno Olmi  
Screenplay: Ermanno Olmi  
Cinematographer: Lamberto Caimi  
Editor: Carla Colombo  
Music: Gianni Ferrio  
Production Designer: Ettore Lombardi  
Running time: 77 minutes  
Format: 35mm, in black and white  
Cast: Carlo Cabrini (Giovanni), Anna Canzi (Liliana)

**Ermanno Olmi (born 1931)**

*Time Stood Still* (1959)

*Il posto* (*The Job*, a.k.a. *The Sound of Trumpets*, 1961)

*The Fiancés* (1963)

*A Man Called John* (1965)

*One Fine Day* (1969)

*In the Summertime* (1971)

*The Circumstance* (1974)

*The Tree of Wooden Clogs* (1978)

*Keep Walking* (1983)

*Long Live the Lady!* (1987)

*The Legend of the Holy Drinker* (1988)

*Down the River* (1992)

*The Secret of the Old Woods* (1993)

*Genesis: The Creation and the Flood* (1994)

*The Profession of Arms* (2001)

*Singing Behind Screens* (2003)

*One Hundred Nails* (2007)

*The Cardboard Village* (2011)

*Greenery Will Bloom Again* (2014)

### ***How I Won the War* (1967)**

Director: Richard Lester

Screenplay: Charles Wood, from the 1963 novel by Patrick Ryan

Cinematographer: David Watkin

Editor: John Victor-Smith

Music: Ken Thorne

Production Designers: Philip Harrison, John Stoll

Costume Designer: Dinah Greet

Running time: 109 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Michael Crawford (Goodbody), John Lennon (Gripweed), Roy Kinnear (Clapper), Lee Montague (Transom), Jack MacGowran (Juniper), Michael Hordern (Grapple), Jack Hedley (Melancholy Musketeer), Karl Michael Vogler (Odlebog), Ronald Lacey (Spool), James Cossins (Droque), Ewan Hooper (Dooley), Alexander Knox (American General), Robert Hardy (British General)

### **Richard Lester (born 1932)**

*It's Trad, Dad!* (1962)

*The Mouse on the Moon* (1963)

*A Hard Day's Night* (1964)

*The Knack and How to Get It* (1965)

*Help!* (1965)

*A Funny Thing Happened On the Way to the Forum* (1966)

*How I Won the War* (1967)

*Petulia* (1968)

*The Bed Sitting Room* (1969)

*The Three Musketeers* (1973)

*Juggernaut* (1974)

*The Four Musketeers* (1974)

*Royal Flash* (1975)

*Robin and Marian* (1976)

*The Ritz* (1976)

*Butch and Sundance: The Early Days* (1979)

*Cuba* (1979)

*Superman II* (1980)

*Superman III* (1983)

*Finders Keepers* (1984)

*The Return of the Musketeers* (1989)

### ***A Gentle Creature* (1969)**

Director: Robert Bresson

Screenplay: Robert Bresson, from the 1876 novella *A Gentle Spirit*, by Fyodor Dostoevsky

Cinematographer: Ghislain Cloquet

Editor: Raymond Lamy

Music: Jean Wiener, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; Henry Purcell's overture "Come Ye Sons of Old"

Art Director: Pierre Charbonnier

Costume Designer: Renée Miguel

Running time: 88 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Dominique Sanda (The Woman), Guy Frangin (The Man), Jane Lobre (Anna), with Dorothée Blank and Claude Ollier (The Doctor)

### **Robert Bresson (1901-99)**

*Angels of the Streets* (1943)

*Les Dames du Bois de Boulogne* (*Ladies of the Park*, 1945)

*Diary of a Country Priest* (1951)

*A Man Escaped* (1956)

*Pickpocket* (1959)

*The Trial of Joan of Arc* (1962)

*Au hasard, Balthazar* (*By Chance, Balthazar*, 1966)

*Mouchette* (1967)



*A Gentle Creature* (1969)  
*Four Nights of a Dreamer* (1971)  
*Lancelot du Lac* (*Lancelot of the Lake*, 1974)  
*The Devil Probably* (1977)  
*L'Argent* (*Money*, 1983)

### **Love (1970)**

Director: Károly Makk

Screenplay: Péter Bacsó and Tibor Déry, from two stories by Déry, “Szerelem” (“Love,” 1956) and “Két asszony” (“Two Women,” 1962)

Cinematographer: János Tóth

Editor: György Sívó

Music: András Mihály

Production Designer: József Romvári

Costume Designer: Piroska Katona

Running time: 84 minutes

Format: 35mm, in black and white

Cast: Lili Darvas (The Old Woman), Mari Törőcsik (Luca), Iván Darvas (János), Erzsí Orsolya (Irén), László Mensáros (The Doctor), Tibor Bitskey (Feri), András Ambrus (Börtönőr), József Almási (Tanár), Zoltán Bán (Borbély)

### **Károly Makk (born 1925)**

*Liliomfi* (1954)

*Ward No. 9* (1955)

*The House under the Rocks* (1959)

*Lost Paradise* (1962)

*Love* (1970)

*Cats' Play* (1972)

*A Very Moral Night* (1977)

*Another Way* (1982)

*The Last Manuscript* (1987)

*Hungarian Requiem* (1991)

*The Gambler* (1997)

*A Long Weekend in Pest and Buda* (2003)

*The Way You Are* (2010)

### **Lola (FRG 2, 1981)**

Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Screenplay: Peter Märthesheimer, Pea Fröhlich, Rainer Werner Fassbinder

Cinematographer: Xaver Schwarzenberger

Editors: Juliane Lorenz, Franz Walsch

Music: Peer Raben

Production Designer: Rolf Zehetbauer

Costume Designer: Barbara Baum

Running time: 113 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Barbara Sukowa (Lola), Armin Mueller-Stahl (von Bohm), Mario Adorf (Schuckert), Matthias Fuchs (Esslin), Helga Feddersen (Mrs. Hettich), Karin Baal (Lola's mother), Ivan Desny (Wittich), Elisabeth Volkmann (Gigi), Hark Bohm (Völker), Karl-Heinz von Hassel (Timmerrding), Rosal Zech (Mrs. Schuckert)

### **Rainer Werner Fassbinder (1945-82)**

*Love Is Colder than Death* (1969)

*Katzelmacher* (1969)

*The American Soldier* (1971)

*Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971)

*The Merchant of Four Seasons* (1971)

*The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972)

*Jail Bait* (1973)

*World on a Wire* (1973)

*Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (1973)

*Martha* (1974)

*Effi Briest* (1974)

*Like a Bird on the Wire* (1975)

*Fox and His Friends* (1975)

*Mother Küsters Goes to Heaven* (1975)

*Fear of Fear* (1975)

*I Only Want You to Love Me* (1976)

*Satan's Brew* (1976)

*Chinese Roulette* (1976)

*The Stationmaster's Wife* (1977)

*Despair* (1978)

*In a Year of Thirteen Moons* (1978)

*The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979)

*The Third Generation* (1979)

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980)

*Lili Marleen* (1981)

*Lola* (1981)

*Veronika Voss* (1982)

*Querelle* (1982)

***The Case Is Closed* (1982)**

Director: Mrinal Sen

Screenplay: Mrinal Sen, from the 1974 novel by Ramapada Chowdhury

Cinematography: K. K. Mahajan

Editor: Gangadhar Naskar

Music: B. V. Karanth

Art Director: Nitish Roy

Running time: 95 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Anjan Dutt (Anjan Sen), Mamata Shankar (Mamata Sen), Sreela Majumdar (Sreeja), Indranil Moitra (Pupai), Dehapatim Das Gupta (Hari), Nilotpal Dey (Inspector), Charuprakash Ghosh (Lawyer)

**Mrinal Sen (born 1923)**

*The Dawn* (1955)

*Under the Blue Sky* (1958)

*Wedding Day* (1960)

*Over Again* (1961)

*And at Last* (1963)

*The Representative* (1964)

*Up in the Clouds* (1965)

*Man of the Soil* (1966)

*Mr. Bhuvan Shome* (1969)

*Interview* (1971)

*An Unfinished Story* (1971)

*Calcutta 71* (1972)

*The Guerilla Fighter* (1973)

*Chorus* (1974)

*The Royal Hunt* (1976)

*The Outsiders* (1977)

*The Man with the Axe* (1978)

*And Quiet Rolls the Dawn* (1979)

*In Search of Famine* (1980)

*The Kaleidoscope* (1981)

*The Case Is Closed* (1982)

*The Ruins* (1983)

*Genesis* (1986)

*Suddenly One Day* (1989)

*World Within, World Without* (1991)

*The Confined* (1993)

*This, My Land* (2002)

***The Mass Is Ended* (1985)**

Director: Nanni Moretti

Screenplay: Nanni Moretti, Sandro Petraglia

Cinematographer: Franco Di Giacomo

Editor: Mirco Garrone

Music: Nicola Piovani

Production Designers: Giorgio Bertolini, Amedeo Fago

Costume Designer: Lia Morandini

Running time: 94 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Nanni Moretti (Don Giulio), Marco Messeri (Saverio), Ferruccio De Ceresa (Father of Don Giulio), Enrica Maria Modugno (Valentina), Dario Cantarelli (Gianni), Luisa de Santis (Lucia), Eugenio Masciari (Antonio), Vincenzo Salemme (Andrea), Roberto Vezzosi (Cesare), Margarita Lozano (Mother of Don Giulio)

**Nanni Moretti (born 1953)**

*I Am Self-Sufficient* (1976)

*Ecce Bombo* (*Here Comes Bombo*, 1978)

*Sweet Dreams* (1981)

*Bianca* (1984)

*The Mass Is Ended* (1985)

*Red Wood Pigeon* (1989)

*Dear Diary* (1993)

*Opening Day of Close-Up* (1996)

*April* (1998)

*The Son's Room* (2001)

*The Caiman* (a.k.a. *The Crocodile*, 2006)

*We Have a Pope* (2011)

*Mia madre* (*My Mother*, 2015)

***Ay, Carmela!* (1990)**

Director: Carlos Saura

Screenplay: Rafael Azcona and Carlos Saura, from the 1986 play by José Sanchis Sinisterra

Cinematographer: José Luis Alcaine

Editor: Pablo González del Amo

Music: Alejandro Massó

Art Director: Rafael Palmero

Costume Designers: Humberto Cornejo, Mercedes Sánchez

Running time: 102 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Carmen Maura (Carmela), Andrés Pajares (Paulino), Gabino Diego (Gustavete), Maurizio De Razza (Lieutenant Ripamonte), José Sancho (Captain), Mario De Candia (Bruno), Miguel Rellán (Interrogator), Edward Zentara (Polish Officer), Rafael Díaz (Sentry), Chema Mazo (Mayor), Antonio Fuentes (Gunner), Mario Martín (Cacique), Emilio del Valle (Cabo Cardoso)

**Carlos Saura (born 1932)**

*The Delinquents* (1959)  
*Weeping for a Bandit* (1964)  
*The Hunt* (1966)  
*Peppermint Frappé* (1967)  
*Stress Is Three* (1968)  
*Honeycomb* (1969)  
*The Garden of Delights* (1970)  
*Anna and the Wolves* (1973)  
*Cousin Angelica* (1973)  
*Cría cuervos* (*Raise Ravens*, 1975)  
*Elisa, My Life* (1977)  
*Blindfolded Eyes* (1978)  
*Mama Turns 100* (1979)  
*Fast, Fast* (1980)  
*Blood Wedding* (1981)  
*Sweet Hours* (1982)  
*Antonieta* (1982)  
*Carmen* (1983)  
*The Stilts* (1984)  
*A Love Bewitched* (1986)  
*El Dorado* (1988)  
*The Dark Night of the Soul* (1989)  
*Ay, Carmela!* (1990)  
*Sevillanas* (1992)  
*Outrage* (1993)  
*Flamenco* (1995)  
*Taxi* (1997)  
*Little Bird* (1997)  
*Tango* (1998)  
*Goya in Bordeaux* (1999)  
*Buñuel and King Solomon's Table* (2001)  
*Salomé* (2002)  
*The 7<sup>th</sup> Day* (2004)  
*Iberia* (2005)

*I, Don Giovanni* (2009)  
*33 días (Guernica 33 Days)*, 2016)

***Secrets and Lies* (1996)**

Director: Mike Leigh

Screenplay: Mike Leigh

Cinematographer: Dick Pope

Editor: Jon Gregory

Music: Andrew Dickson

Production Designer: Alison Chitty

Costume Designer: Maria Price

Running time: 140 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Timothy Spall (Maurice), Phyllis Logan (Monica), Brenda Blethyn (Cynthia),  
Claire Rushbrook (Roxanne), Marianne Jean-Baptiste (Hortense), Elizabeth  
Berrington (Jane)

**Mike Leigh (born 1943)**

*Bleak Moments* (1971)

*Hard Labour* (1973)

*The Permissive Society* (1975)

*Nuts in May* (1976)

*Abigail's Party* (1977)

*Kiss of Death* (1977)

*Who's Who* (1978)

*Grown-Ups* (1980)

*Meantime* (1983)

*Four Days in July* (1985)

*High Hopes* (1988)

*Life Is Sweet* (1990)

*Naked* (1993)

*Secrets and Lies* (1996)

*Career Girls* (1997)

*Topsy-Turvy* (2000)

*All or Nothing* (2002)

*Vera Drake* (2004)

*Happy-Go-Lucky* (2008)

*Another Year* (2010)

*Mr. Turner* (2014)



### ***The Apple* (1998)**

Director: Samira Makhmalbaf

Screenplay: Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf

Cinematographers: Mohamad Ahmadi, Ebrahim Ghafori

Editor: Mohsen Makhmalbaf

Running time: 86 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Massoumeh Naderi (Massoumeh), Zahra Naderi (Zahra), Ghorbanali Naderi (Father), Azizeh Mohamadi (Azizeh), Zahra Saghrisaz

### **Samira Makhmalbaf (born 1980)**

*The Apple* (1998)

*Blackboards* (2000)

*At Five in the Afternoon* (2003)

*Two-Legged Horse* (2008)

### ***Rosetta* (1999)**

Directors: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne

Screenplay: Jean-Pierre Dardenne, Luc Dardenne

Cinematographer: Alain Marcoen

Editor: Marie-Hélène Dozo

Music: Jean-Pierre Cocco

Production Designer: Igor Gabriel

Costume Designer: Monic Parelle

Running time: 95 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Émilie Dequenne (*Rosetta*), Fabrizio Rongione (*Riquet*), Anne Yernaux (*The Mother*), Olivier Gourmet (*The Boss*), Bernard Marbaix (*The Campgrounds Manager*), Frédéric Bodson (*The Head of Personnel*), Florian Delain (*The Boss's Son*), Colette Regibeau (*Madame Riga*)

### **Jean-Pierre Dardenne (born 1951) and Luc Dardenne (born 1954)**

*Falsch* (*False*, 1987)

*Je pense à vous* (*I Think of You*, 1992)

*La Promesse* (*The Promise*, 1996)

*Rosetta* (1999)

*The Son* (2002)

*L'Enfant* (*The Child*, 2005)

*The Silence of Lorna* (2008)

*The Kid with a Bike* (2011)

*Two Days, One Night* (2014)

*The Unknown Girl* (2016)

***The Road Home* (2000)**

Director: Zhang Yimou

Screenplay: Bao Shi, adapted from his 1999 novel *Remembrance*

Cinematographer: Hou Yong

Editor: Zhai Rui

Music: San Bao

Art Director: Cao Juiping

Costume Designer: Tong Huamiao

Running time: 89 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Ziyi Zhang (Zhao Di, Young), Honglei Sun (Luo Yusheng), Hao Zheng (Luo Changyu), Yulian Zhao (Zhao Di, Old), Bin Li (Grandmother), Guifa Chang (Mayor, Old), Wencheng Sung (Mayor), Qi Liu (Carpenter Xia, Old), Bo Ji (Carpenter Xia), Zhongxi Zhang (Crockery Repairman)

**Zhang Yimou (born 1950)**

*Red Sorghum* (1987)

*Codename Cougar* (a.k.a. *The Puma Action*, 1989)

*Ju Dou* (1990)

*Raise the Red Lantern* (1991)

*The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992)

*To Live* (1994)

*Shanghai Triad* (1995)

*Keep Cool* (1997)

*Not One Less* (1999)

*The Road Home* (2000)

*Happy Times* (2002)

*Hero* (2003)

*House of Flying Daggers* (2004)

*Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles* (2005)

*Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006)

*A Woman, a Gun, and a Noodle Shop* (2009)

*Under the Hawthorn Tree* (2010)

*The Flowers of War* (2011)

*Coming Home* (2014)

*Lady of the Dynasty* (2015)

*The Great Wall* (2016)

### ***The Man Without a Past (2002)***

Director: Aki Kaurismäki

Screenplay: Aki Kaurismäki

Cinematographer: Timo Salminen

Editor: Timo Linnasalo

Music: Leevi Madetoja, Annikki Tähti, Antero Jakoila, Markus Allan, The Renegades, Masao Onose, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tapio Rautavaara, Marko Haavisto & Poutahaukat, Herbert Booth, Taisto Wesslin, Crazy Ken Band

Production Designers: Jukka Salmi, Markku Pätilä

Costume Designer: Outi Harjupatana

Running time: 97 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Markku Peltola (M), Kati Outinen (Irma), Juhani Niemelä (Nieminen), Kaija Pakarinen (Kaisa Nieminen), Sakari Kuosmanen (Anttila)

### **Aki Kaurismäki (born 1957)**

*Crime and Punishment* (1983)

*Calamari Union* (1985)

*Shadows in Paradise* (1986)

*Hamlet Goes Business* (1987)

*Ariel* (1988)

*Leningrad Cowboys Go America* (1989)

*The Match Factory Girl* (1989)

*I Hired a Contract Killer* (1990)

*The Bohemian Life* (1992)

*Take Care of Your Scarf, Tatiana* (1994)

*Leningrad Cowboys Meet Moses* (1994)

*Drifting Clouds* (1996)

*Juha* (1999)

*The Man Without a Past* (2002)

*Lights in the Dusk* (2006)

*Le Havre* (2011)

### ***The Italian (2005)***

Director: Andrei Kravchuk

Screenplay: Andrei Kravchuk, Andrei Romanov

Cinematographer: Alexander Burov

Editor: Tamara Lipartiya

Music: Alexander Kneiffel

Production Designer: Vladimir Svetozarov

Costume Designers: Natalia Brabanova, Marina Nikolayeva

Running time: 99 minutes

Format: 35mm, in color

Cast: Kolya Spiridonov (Vanya Solntsev), Mariya Kuznetsova (Madam), Nikolai Reutov (Grisha), Yuri Itskov (Headmaster), Denis Moiseenko (Kolyan), Sasha Sirotkin (Sery), Andrei Yelizarov (Timokha), Vladimir Shipov (Vovan), Polina Vorobieva (Natakha), Olga Shuvalova (Irka), Dima Zemlyanko (Anton), Darya Lesnikova (Mukhin's Mother), Rudolf Kuld (Guard)

**Andrei Kravchuk (born 1962)**

*The Christmas Miracle* (2000)

*The Italian* (2005)

*The Admiral* (2008)

*Viking* (2016)

***Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010)**

Director: Nuri Bilge Ceylan

Screenplay: Ebru Ceylan, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Ercan Kesal

Cinematographer: Gökhan Tiryaki

Editor: Bora Göksingöl

Production Designers: Çağrı Erdoğan, Dilek Yapkuöz Ayaztuna

Running time: 157 minutes

Format: Digital 4K (Sony F65 camera), in color

Cast: Muhammet Uzuner (Dr. Cemal), Yılmaz Erdoğan (Commissar Naci), Taner Bırsel (Prosecutor Nusret), Ahmet Mümtaz Taylan (Driver Arab Ali), Firat Tanış (Suspect Kenan), Ercan Kesal (Mukhtar), Erol Erarslan (Murder Victim Yaşar), Nihan Okutucu (Yaşar's Wife, Gülnaz), Uğur Arslanoğlu (Courthouse Driver Tevfik), Murat Kiliç (Police Officer Izzet), Şafak Karalı (Courthouse Clerk Abidin), Emre Şen (Sergeant Önder), Burhan Yıldız (Suspect Ramazan), Cansu Demirci (Mukhtar's Daughter Cemile)

**Nuri Bilge Ceylan (born 1959)**

*The Small Town* (1997)

*Clouds of May* (1999)

*Distant* (2002)

*Climates* (2006)

*Three Monkeys* (2008)

*Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2010)

*Winter Sleep* (2014)



## A GUIDE TO FILM ANALYSIS

Many of us are used to sitting back in the dark and viewing a film uncritically; indeed, most Hollywood films are constructed so as to render “invisible” the carefully constructed (or edited) nature of the medium. Furthermore, because a film is composed of visual, aural, and linguistic components that are manipulated in numerous ways, it is a challenge to take apart the totality of the film experience and to interpret how that experience was assembled—and *why* it was assembled in a particular way.

In the paragraphs to come the reader will find brief explanations of ways in which to analyze the language of film. Although this list is not comprehensive, it does contain a lot of information. If film interpretation is new to the reader, he or she will not be able to keep track of all of these elements while viewing any one film—this is an acquired skill. One should concentrate at first on a few aspects that seem to offer the most opportunity for critical reading.

If one is viewing the film only once, one should try to take notes in shorthand while watching. Arrows can be used to note camera angles and camera movement; quick sketches can be used to note shot composition and elements of the *mise-en-scène*. As soon as possible after viewing the film, one should write out one’s impressions, noting the most important elements. If one intends to write about the film and will be seeing it again, one should take minimal notes the first time through (at the same time as one registers important scenes to which one wants to return).

When analyzing a film as a historical document, one should keep in mind the film’s contemporary audience and author-director. One’s own personal reaction to the film may serve as a starting point, but one needs to convert this reaction into historical analysis—i.e., how is the viewer different from, yet similar to, the historical audience/author-director? What has changed and what has stayed the same? One should also remember the technological changes that have taken place over the years: one should keep in mind what audiences would have expected at the time and how filmmakers once used the technology at their disposal.



It is especially important to consider substantial changes in the manner of presentation if one will be watching the film on a television set. One should be aware that most Hollywood films made after the early 1950s have an “aspect ratio” (height and width ratio) different from that of television screens. Most videotapes of these films have been altered by the “pan and scan” method, which dramatically changes elements such as shot composition and camera movement. Videotapes that are “widescreen” preserve the correct aspect ratio. Most DVDs now come in both “standard” (altered) and “widescreen” format, or only in the correct aspect ratio, and most laser disks use the correct aspect ratio. If possible, one should find a format that has not altered the aspect ratio.

### Digging Deeper: Levels of Meaning

Movies are entertainment. Movies are documents of their time and place. Movies are artistic forms of self-expression. Movies we see at theaters, on television, or at home are typically *narrative* films. They tell stories about characters going through experiences. But what are they really about? What is the *content* of a film?

Recounting the plot of a movie, telling what happens, is the simplest way to explain it to someone else. But this is neither a film *review* nor a film *analysis*. It is merely a synopsis with which anyone else who sees or has seen the movie will likely agree. This level of content may be called the **referential**, since it refers directly to events that occur in the story and possibly to some aspects of the story that are merely implied. Most films, however, can be analyzed more thoroughly to reveal deeper levels of meaning.

A *review* (ca. 400-1,200 words) typically includes personal impressions and evaluations of a movie’s content and techniques. A good review may be highly subjective yet still touch on topics that might be explored in more detail in a longer, formal analysis. An *analysis* (ca. 1,200-7,500 words) attempts to determine how the film uses various cinematic techniques and elements of film form or narrative strategy to make viewers react in a certain way, and tries, finally, to discover why the film makes viewers come away with certain opinions about it. Serious criticism, whether essays written for magazines, journals, books, or class assignments, attempts to analyze films rather than merely review them or provide simple descriptions of what happens. An analysis requires some reflective thought about the film, and usually benefits from multiple viewings as well as outside research.

Most films include lines of dialogue and obvious developments of character that explicitly communicate meaning to the viewers. **Explicit** content is perhaps some sort of “moral of the story” or sociopolitical attitude that the filmmaker is expressing directly through the mouths and actions of the characters. A slightly deeper level of interpretation is **implicit** (or subtextual) content, which may be

less obvious but can still be inferred from seeing how the characters change, grow, or develop in the course of the film. Issues and ideas dealing with general human relations (rather than those specific to individual characters) may be fairly easy to recognize but are not explicitly stated by the characters. Moreover, different viewers might interpret the same action or event in different ways, depending upon their own experiences and expectations.

Implicit, explicit, and referential interpretations are based entirely on the film as a self-contained work, on “internal evidence.” It is also possible to find richer meaning in a film, meaning deduced from knowing something about its creators and the time and place in which it was created—meaning deduced, that is, from “external evidence” that is not possible to identify exclusively from the film itself. Sometimes this type of meaning is intentional on the part of the filmmakers, and at other times it may be unconsciously incorporated into the story. Analyzing a film on this level is an instance of treating the film as a *symptom* of a much greater influence than the simple dramatic concerns, on the part of the director and screenwriter, for the characters and their actions. A **symptomatic** interpretation looks at the film as part of the broad context of society, reflecting and illustrating themes prevalent in the culture, in the time and place it was made, and possibly in the creator’s personal experience. This level of interpretation tries to recognize symbolic content, identifying characters and situations as *metaphors* for something else, or possibly seeing the entire story as an *allegory* about something else.

### Figuring It All Out: Approaches to Interpretation

Identifying the film’s content, whether explicit, implicit, or symptomatic, is an interpretation of its **ideational** meaning. It is up to viewers and critics to determine whether a film is effective at achieving some or all of its intentions, and sometimes even what those intentions might be. Analysis from a variety of approaches—all of them ultimately capped by a humanistic perspective, as opposed to an ideologically politicized one (feminist, Marxist or class-based, postcolonial, racial, homosexual, etc.)—can help a viewer realize just what a film is trying to do and to appreciate it more, whether or not it suits one’s taste.

Once people realized that the cinema could do much more than provide simple entertainment, a variety of theories and approaches were developed to help analyze films in order to understand how they created responses in viewers and just what their narratives might ultimately mean. Different approaches examine different aspects of a film for different reasons.

A **formalist** approach looks at the film itself, its structure or form. Thus, while other approaches might use some degree of external evidence to analyze a film, a formalist approach will focus primarily on internal evidence. This approach might analyze how the way in which the narrative is presented forces the viewer to see things at certain times, and in such a way, that his reaction to them would be

different if they were presented some other way. A *narrative* analysis will examine how a film employs various narrative elements (such as character, setting, repetition/variation, chronological structure, etc.) to convey meaning to the viewer. Analysis of specific formal *techniques* might concentrate on a film's use of *mise-en-scène*, photographic composition, camera movement, editing choice, sound in relation to the image, etc., noting the effect of those techniques on the viewer's perception of a scene and interpretation of what it may mean.

A **realist** approach examines how a film represents “reality.” Some films attempt to make techniques “invisible” to viewers so that realistic characters and situations are always the primary focus. Others attempt to use cinematic techniques to create a certain type of intense psychological reality that the filmmaker wants the audience to experience—love, aging, insanity, drug addiction, etc. Some films are thus more concerned with creating emotional moods and impressions than with depicting a traditionally plotted story with an obvious beginning, middle, and end. These films may be attempting to convey a type of reality that is important to their creators, hoping that viewers will comprehend it, but the use of unconventional techniques and structure may require a concerted effort at understanding on the part of a viewer—multiple viewings, for example, or even an explanation on the part of the filmmaker. Look, for example, at the unusual films written or directed by Charlie Kaufman, such as *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), *Synecdoche, New York* (2008), *Adaptation* (2002), and *Being John Malkovich* (1999). Earlier films that might benefit from this approach to analysis include Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) and Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919).

A **contextualist** approach to analysis always considers a film as part of some broader context. This can be society at large (as in the aforementioned **symptomatic** interpretation); the particular culture, time, and place in which the film was created (a **culturalist** approach); or the director's personal life and previous body of work (an **auteurist** approach, which assumes that the director is the “author” of a film—that it is the product of a single filmmaker's imaginative talent, singular sensibility, and unifying vision, as evidenced in his cinematic *oeuvre* to date). The **nationalist** approach investigates and discusses films in terms of their national character. The premise behind this approach is that different film cultures emerge with different characteristics in different nations, and, therefore, one must determine the social, cultural, and political conditions that characterize the culture and how these conditions manifest themselves in what is portrayed on screen. A **psychological** approach often identifies plot or characters elements by using the theories of psychologists like Freud or Jung in a search for sexual symbolism, the treatment of the subconscious, representations of the id, ego, and superego, etc. A **generic** approach looks at a film as a representative of a genre, comparing it with other films from the same genre and finding meaning by identifying shared motifs or variations from the expected formula. This approach is especially useful

when a film intentionally subverts or inverts various elements of traditional generic formulas. A generic analysis often benefits from a wider-reaching, contextual approach, since a substantial number of genre films (especially science-fiction films and westerns, but also others such as war films and historical dramas) incorporate intentional metaphors and symptomatic content relating to contemporary society at the time they were made.

Another way to examine a film in a certain context is to chronicle its **reception** by audiences and critics over the years, possibly in conjunction with one or more of the other approaches noted above. Some films were huge popular *and* critical successes when originally released, but were all but forgotten within a few years or perhaps a decade or two. Other films were virtually ignored when they first came out, but gradually gained viewer and critical acclaim to the point that they are now considered time-honored masterpieces or beloved favorites. It is possible that a film originally rejected by critics but popular with the viewing public gradually reversed such a position over the decades, so that now it is critically respected but largely disliked by the general public. Still other films provoke a certain amount of controversy, falling in and out of favor from one decade to another as popular or critical tastes change. Historical events and general shifts in popular attitudes, as well as cultural trends, over time may be related to such changes in a film's status. A variation on this survey of response to a film over the years is the **genetic** approach, which follows a film through all stages of its creation and release. This approach will examine and evaluate various drafts of the script and memos about changes or revisions during production, continuing through various cuts of the film made for preview audiences, theatrical release, re-edited re-releases, television and video editions, and later "definitive" director's cuts. Such an analysis may provide valuable insight into the artistic process and its relationship to commercial considerations, as well as make suggestions about the tastes, values, and general sophistication of target audiences.

A viewer can use any one or combination of these critical approaches to try to figure out just what a filmmaker is trying to say or imply in a work. Different approaches may embrace or totally ignore other approaches to come up with similar or completely opposite ideas about what a film really means. There may be as many different interpretations of a film as there are critics, but one thing is certain: examining a film from a variety of approaches could reveal aspects of its meaning that one never even considered while watching it for the first time. Of course, trying to use every approach to analyze a film would result in a book-length study. Any particular film may lend itself most easily to analysis through one or two specific approaches, with perhaps some consideration by means of one additional approach. In the end, writing a critical analysis, whether it is three pages long or twenty-five pages, requires narrowing down the scope of one's coverage to only what seems most important about the film and most rewarding to discuss.

## Preparing to Write about a Film

Each writer may have an individualized approach to responding to, and writing about, a film, but all writers will work more effectively if they prepare to view the film *and* to write about it. Therefore, to recap, one should aim to:

***Investigate background information*** on the film one is writing about, such as the film's historical, cultural, and stylistic contexts, or its production history. This kind of background material can prove useful in one's analysis, evaluation, and general understanding of the film because, even if one's assignment does not ask that one explicitly write about the film in relation to the era in which it was made, knowledge of that history will deepen one's critical awareness of other aspects of the film. Examining the film as a process that has been shaped by different types of events—historical, contemporary, and individual or personal—can lead to one's having one's own ideas about the film.

***Explore the individual and collaborative factors*** that affected the film's final form so that one can better understand the aesthetic and cinematic decisions the director made. The final images one views on screen come from an extended creative process, involving the influence of the director, screenwriter, and cinematographer (among others), as well as the relevant conditions during the making of the film (including financing, casting, weather, illness, etc.).

***Find out who the film's director is and what other films he has made.*** By viewing some of the director's other films, one will have a better understanding of the film one is writing about as one develops a larger picture of the themes that have inspired the director, the genres and techniques he has preferred, and the consistency (or lack thereof) in storytelling method over the course of his career.

***Be selective in one's approach to elements of film composition,*** as production includes everything from lighting and sound, to wardrobe and editing, to special effects. The more specific the focus, the closer one can analyze one's chosen area of investigation and relate that analysis to a thesis about the particular cinematic work as a whole.

***Think comprehensively about the film's story and characters.*** Cinematic images do not merely represent a single dimension of a subject, such as just the narrative or just the characters. All feature films tell stories and have characters, but the way in which the narratives and their protagonists are presented to us can vary greatly in style, tone, and technique from film to film and filmmaker to filmmaker. Film analysis is concerned with *how* these various elements help tell the story and create the characters.

**Watch films with critical awareness**, just as one would actively read and annotate a book one was preparing to write about; one should make note of a film's striking features and ask relevant questions. After an initial viewing, if possible one should watch the film a second time, taking notes and letting one's general, preliminary questions evolve into more specific ones. If one is writing about a film that one can view only once, the initial groundwork will be essential to the success of one's paper. One should be aware, too, that doing research beforehand can play a significant role in freeing the viewer to experience the film with purposeful observation and informed note-taking.

**Guide oneself to a focused topic** through one's questions, and continue to narrow one's approach as one decides which questions can be grouped together under a shared idea concerning the theme of the film, the function of its characters, or the nature of its technical and formal features.

### **Questions to Ask in Any Critical Assessment**

The following questions should help in one's critical evaluation of a film for an assigned essay. One should keep in mind, again, that sophisticated film, like sophisticated literature, requires more than one viewing to begin to appreciate its purpose beyond that of merely telling a story.

As one views a film, one should consider how the cuts, camera angles, shots, and movement work to create particular meanings. Think about how they establish space, privilege certain characters, suggest relationships, emphasize themes, or forward the narrative. In addition to shot distances, angles, editing, and camera movement, one should note details of the narrative, setting, characters, lighting, props, costume, and sound.

Ask oneself the following questions as one analyzes any film:

#### **Background**

Who is the writer of the film? Has the screenplay been adapted from another work?

Who is the director?

When was the film made?

How might industrial, social, and economic factors have influenced the film's making? Did conditions in the filmmaking industry at the time limit the way in which the film could represent particular subjects? Does the film follow or critique the dominant ideologies of its period? Does it reflect and even shape particular cultural tensions?



### Form/Narrative/Perspective

What “happens” in the plot? In considering the narrative structure, note whether the film follows a standard chronological narrative, and how time is used. (That is, how is the story told: linearly; with flashbacks or flash-forwards; or episodically?) What are the key moments and how are they established? What are the climaxes and anti-climaxes? How far ahead is the audience in understanding what is happening to the characters than the characters themselves are? What propels the story forward? What is the pace of the narrative? How do earlier parts of the narrative set up later parts? Where do the key emotive moments occur—that is, when the audience is frightened, enraged, enraptured, avenged, etc.—and how has the narrative helped to establish these emotions on the part of the audience? Note when there is a *change of knowledge* (when characters or audience members become aware of new information) that shifts the *hierarchy of knowledge* (the relative amount of knowledge characters have, as opposed to what knowledge the audience has). Does the narrative have a coherence or unity, or does it leave the audience feeling unfulfilled or confused?

Is the film told, in general, from a particular character’s point of view, or is it “objective”? Is the film’s perspective primarily intellectual or emotional, visionary or realistic? Within the film, are particular shots shown from this or that character’s point of view (in a “subjective shot”), and how does the camera technically reinforce such a point of view? On whom is the audience meant to be focusing at particular moments?

What does the title mean in relation to the film as a whole? Consider alternative titles and why this particular title was chosen; also, consider any ambiguities in the title. The opening credits themselves establish a tone and often are used to foreshadow events, themes, or metaphors, so one should pay careful attention from the very beginning of any film. How are the opening credits presented? Are they connected to the film’s meaning in any way?

Why does the film’s action begin in the way that it does?

Are there any linguistic or visual motifs that are repeated during the film? What purpose do they serve?

Which three or four sequences are the most important in the film? Why?

Is sound used in any vivid ways to enhance the film’s drama, heighten tension, disorient the viewer, etc.?

How does the film use color or light-and-dark to suggest tone and mood in different scenes?

Are there any striking uses of perspective (through camera angle or placement)? How does this relate to the meaning of the scene in question?

How and when are scenes cut? Is there any meaningful pattern to the way the editing is carried out?

What specific scene constitutes the film's climax? How does this scene resolve the central issue of the film?

Does the film leave any disunities or loose ends at its conclusion? If so, what does this suggest?

Why does the film conclude on this particular image and not some other one?

### **Theme**

What is the film's central theme, idea, or generative principle? That is, from an intellectual perspective, what is the motivating force behind the film?

Does the film present a clear-cut point-of-view on its particular subject? How so, and to what end?

Are there any aspects of the film's theme that are left ambiguous at the conclusion? Why?

How does this film measure up to literary texts you have read on the same subject?

### **Characterization**

Who are the central characters? How are minor characters used? Are characters thinly or fully drawn, and why? Who in the audience is meant to relate to which characters, and what sort of emotion (fear, pleasure, anxiety) are audience members meant to feel on account of this identification? Is there a clear-cut hero or villain, or do these figures remain ambivalent in the film? What values do the characters represent, and do the characters change in the course of the action? Are the characters meant to play a particular "type" and do they play *against* type at any time? Do different characters use different kinds of language? Do certain characters speak through their silences?

What is the acting style of the performers: mannered ("classical"); intense and psychologically driven ("Method"); or less affected and more "natural"? Do particular actors have their own recognizable style or type, and how do the filmmakers integrate the various acting styles of different performers? What expectations do audiences have of "star" actors? Do the stars, in this instance, fulfill or challenge the expectations of the audience as they perform their roles?

### *Mise-en-scène/Montage*

Is the setting realistic or stylized? What atmosphere does the setting suggest? Do particular objects in the setting serve a symbolic function? Does the setting itself serve such a function?

How are the characters costumed and made up? What does their clothing or makeup reveal about their social standing, ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age? How do costume and makeup convey character? How are characters contrasted by means of costume?

What in the film is well-illuminated and what is in shadow? How does the lighting scheme shape our perception of character, space, or mood? How are colors used? Is there a pattern or scheme to the use of color? That is, is color used symbolically in the film?

What shot distances are used? Does one notice a movement from longer to closer shots? When in particular are the various shot distances used (e.g., the opening of a scene, during a conversation, etc.)? What purposes do the long shots, medium shots, and close-ups serve?

How do camera angles function? How do they shape the audience's view of characters, spaces, or actions?

How do camera movements function? What information do they provide about characters, objects, and locations? Do the camera movements guide the viewer's eye toward particular details? Do they align the viewer's perspective with that of a character?

Editing ("cuts") creates continuities (or discontinuities), juxtapositions, and overall narrative structure in a film. What types of cuts are used? How are the cuts used: to establish rhythm, shift the viewer between characters, create transitions between spaces, mark the passage of time? Does the film's editing comment on the relationships between characters or spaces?

What is the purpose of the film's music? How does it direct our attention within the image? How does it shape our interpretation of the image? How are sound (including dialogue) and sound effects used, in general, in the film?

Was the film shot in a studio, on a soundstage, or was it shot on location? How is the setting integrated into the action, both the larger background of that setting and its smaller foreground (including props)? How is the setting used in composing shots (verticals and horizontals, windows and doors, shades and mirrors, etc.)? How do particular settings (a vast mountain range, a cluttered urban setting) function as signs in order to convey narrative or psychological information to the viewer?

## TOPICS FOR WRITING AND DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the extent to which the “serious” films in this book subvert or re-deploy the following “popular” narrative elements: melodrama, sentimentality, romance, and comedy or comic relief. Discuss also the extent to which some, or all, of these elements are embodied in the “popular” movies *Way Down East* and *The Gold Rush*.
2. Using examples from your own viewing experience as well as the films discussed in this book, compare and contrast the commercial-industrial model of cinema with the aesthetic-artisanal model. Be sure to include in your answer a consideration of the following issues: globalization and cultural hybridity versus cultural specificity; federal subsidy versus private financing; film as a “total work of art” versus film as the most financially profitable form of entertainment; professional acting versus amateur or non-professional performance; and *auteurist* vision versus assembly-line production.
3. “The Hollywood film has traditionally been one of action and clear-cut values, the European film one of character and moral ambiguities, and the Japanese film one concerned with the circumstances that surround a human being.” Discuss the validity of this statement in reference to a European film, an American film, and a Japanese film from among the ones treated in *Writing about Film: A Reader*.
4. Comment upon the use of children as a dramatic device in two of the following films: *The Case Is Closed*, *The Apple*, and *The Italian*. How are children characterized in these films, as opposed to conventional or commercial movies, and how are they deployed to advance the “adult” narrative?
5. Discuss the extent to which visual style creates thematic meaning in two of the following films: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *Tokyo Story*, *A Gentle Creature*, and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*.

6. Discuss the significance of the titles of four of the following films: *The Rules of the Game*, *The Mass Is Ended*, *Tokyo Story*, *Way Down East*, *A Gentle Creature*, *Secrets and Lies*, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, *Winter Light*, and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*.
7. Describe the degree to which two of the following films—*Citizen Kane*, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, and *The Case Is Closed*—can, or cannot, be considered tragedies (as opposed to works of pathos), if tragedy is understood as a form characterized by individual pain or suffering leading to sacrificial decay, defeat, death, or destruction; by fear, misery, and terror; by exceptionality and isolation; by an inevitability or irremediableness that may take on metaphysical implications; by enervation and catharsis; and by internal division on the part of the protagonist, culminating in fatal error and finally self-awareness or “recognition.”
8. Discuss the extent to which documentary principles influenced the conception and shooting of two of the following otherwise fictional works: *Rosetta*, *Hiroshima, mon amour*, *The Apple*, and *The Italian*—each of which was made by a former documentary filmmaker.
9. Compare and contrast three of the following sets of characters: Charles Foster Kane from *Citizen Kane* and the Lone Prospector from *The Gold Rush*; Cynthia from *Secrets and Lies* and the Old Woman from *Love*; Lola from *Lola* and the Woman from *A Gentle Creature*; the pastor in *Winter Light* and the priest in *The Mass Is Ended*; the lovers in *Hiroshima, mon amour* and the lovers in *The Road Home* or in *The Fiancés*; Fausto from *I vitelloni* and Giovanni from *The Fiancés*; the two girls in *The Apple* and the children of the orphanage in *The Italian*.
10. In the movies, point of view tends to be less rigorous than in fiction, for fiction films tend to fall naturally into the omniscient form. Using examples from the films treated in this book, discuss how omniscient narration—as opposed to first-person, third-person, or objective narration—is almost inevitable in fiction film.
11. Comment, from a social as well as an artistic point of view, on the relationship between the rise of the Internet and the decline worldwide in the number of movie theaters. Related to this question, how do changes in technology affect the nature of film and of film spectatorship?
12. What should one study at university if one wishes oneself to become a creator of film art?
13. Elaborate on the following statement: “Every film is a fiction film.”
14. What is the relationship between filmgoing and visual perception in general?

15. What are the implications of the replacement of reel (acetate) film by digital film?
16. What can film do that other art forms cannot do, or what can film do better than other art forms? That is, what makes movies “cinematic”? What separates film from theater and from literature? Use examples from the films treated in this book to illustrate your points.
17. Italian neorealist films were often criticized for describing the symptoms of social problems rather than probing their causes; they were often attacked for not examining the revolutionary implications of the question, “What next?” Discuss the extent to which the post-neorealist *I vitelloni* and *The Fiancés* are examples of such films.
18. Discuss the degree to which *Hiroshima, mon amour* and *A Gentle Creature*, in addition to featuring female protagonists, have the following themes in common: the rejection of, or distrust in, language; the difficulty, if not impossibility, of romantic love in the modern world; the metaphysical, philosophical, or existential (as opposed to socioeconomic) problems of middle-to-upper-middle-class characters.
19. Compare and contrast three of the following as socially realistic films: *The Case Is Closed*, *Rosetta*, *Secrets and Lies*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *The Fiancés*. That is to say, what is the social situation or social problem in each film, how is it dramatized, and who are the main characters and *why* are they the main characters?
20. Is film at its best a record of reality, a realistic medium, or a way to alter reality, a formalist and even fantasy-driven medium? Where do you place the products of the New American Cinema on the continuum leading from realism to formalism/fantastication, and where do you place the films of Godard and Buñuel? Related to this question, are movies products of their culture, or do they shape that culture?
21. Comment upon the role or treatment of females in three of the following films, paying particular attention to each film’s social, political, and religious context: *The Apple*, *Rosetta*, *Lola*, *A Gentle Creature*, and *Way Down East*. Also pay attention to such themes as the following, where they apply: the rejection of, distrust in, or very absence of language; the difficulty, if not impossibility, of romantic love in the modern world; the metaphysical, philosophical, or existential problems of middle-to-upper-middle-class characters, as opposed to the socioeconomic problems of lower-class characters.
22. Discuss the role of comedy in such ostensibly serious films as *How I Won the War*, *Ay, Carmela!*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *The Mass Is Ended*. By



contrast, discuss what is thematically serious about such an otherwise comic, sometimes farcical, film as *The Gold Rush*.

23. The following films are adaptations from fiction or drama: *A Gentle Creature*, *How I Won the War*, *The Case Is Closed*, *Way Down East*, *Love, Ay, Carmela!*, *The Road Home*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Hamlet*, *Titus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Read the original source of at least two of these films and then describe why you prefer it to the film version made of it, or vice versa.
24. What is the difference between film analysis and film criticism? What is the difference between film history and film theory? Which is more important, film theory or film criticism? Are they equally important, or equally unimportant, in the end?
25. Pier Paolo Pasolini has maintained that the cinema is a vehicle far more suited to the transmission of myth than either poetry or prose because its images can reproduce physical reality at the same time that they are larger than life; because, like myths, dreams, and fairy tales, film can move fluidly through time and space and shift emotional tones just as fluidly; and because, even as myth exists both outside and inside history and arrives at universals through particulars, so does the cinema transcend a national language of words by means of the international language of images and transform the reality of those images into an iconography of the human psyche. In your view, which films treated in *Writing about Film: A Reader* are the most mythic—and the least?
26. Which artistic form do you prefer more, the theater or the cinema, and why?
27. Choose one of the following statements and defend it: (1) violent films tend to create violent tendencies in spectators who habitually view them; (2) violent films tend to purge the violent tendencies of spectators who habitually view them.
28. Discuss the extent to which *The Italian* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* are “road pictures” more concerned with the journey or search itself, on the road—together with what that reveals about the traveler and those with whom he comes into contact—than with the end or final object of the journey/quest.
29. Discuss the use of Christian symbolism or reference in three of the following three films: *Rosetta*, *The Man Without a Past*, and *A Gentle Creature*.
30. Discuss the extent to which *How I Won the War* and *The Rules of the Game* can be called vile or subversive films, as opposed to ameliorative, socially constructive works of art.

31. Compare and contrast the effect of war—in particular World War I, the Spanish Civil War, or World War II—on the action of three of the following films: *Hiroshima, mon amour*, *The Rules of the Game*, *Ay, Carmela!*, and *How I Won the War*.
32. Describe the function of “telescoping” (setting a film’s action in the past but intending that action as a comment upon the world of the present, outside the film at the time it was made) in *The Gold Rush* and *How I Won the War*. Also, describe the function of the reverse action—“updating” a script from the time in which it was originally set to a later period—in such Shakespearean adaptations as Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* and Michael Hoffman’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.
33. Discuss the extent to which *The Case Is Closed* and *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* are instances of, as well as revisions to, the “police procedural” or crime-film genre. Related to this, consider the extent to which *The Italian* itself is both an instance of, and a reaction against, the typical orphan or orphanage film.
34. The French director Robert Bresson once said, “The soundtrack invented silence.” Choose a scene or sequence from two of the following films—*The Fiancés*, *The Man Without a Past*, *Tokyo Story*, *Winter Light*, and *A Gentle Creature*—and discuss how, in each instance, the narrative is developed, if not in silence, then without, or almost without, dialogue. That is, discuss how the story is told in these excerpts more through cinematic means—images and sound—than through words.
35. In what sense is film an art? What is the “language” of film art? Who is the artist behind an individual film?
36. Any writer’s film criticism is, should be, and cannot help but be subjective—that is, subject to alteration over time in its judgments or opinions. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why? Is the quality of film criticism itself in decline, now that anyone and everyone can become a film critic by publishing his or her work, without editorial control, on the Internet? Or will film criticism ultimately be enriched by its democratic, “immediate” practice online?
37. How do audiences react to and interpret what they see on the screen? Are filmgoers actually shaped by what they see, or do they do the shaping themselves, through the expression of their movie preferences at the box office?
38. Charlton Heston once said, “The trouble with film as a business is that it’s an art. The trouble with film as an art is that it’s a business.” Explain how this contradiction affects the making of movies.

39. Some critics have argued that realism in the film musical is a matter of degree, and that audiences watching musicals often experience a lift and are taken to what one critic has called a different register. What is meant here by “register,” and do you think that this critic makes a valid point?
40. The classical Hollywood style—unlike that of, say, *Citizen Kane*—seeks to be “invisible.” What does this mean? Describe the characteristics of the “invisible” style of Hollywood filmmaking. Your response should include references to stylistic features such as *mise-en-scène* and editing.
41. The Hollywood studio system—developed in the 1910s and 1920s from the industrial model created by Henry Ford—helped American film art to develop but it also hindered that art’s development. Discuss those aspects of the system that helped the development of film art and those aspects that hindered it.
42. Compare and contrast two of the following as “ensemble” films: *The Rules of the Game*, *I vitelloni*, and *Secrets and Lies*.
43. Since the cinema is defined by technology, it has always been influenced by technological changes and will continue to be influenced by them. What are some of these technological changes, and what impact do you think they had on past films, are having on film now, and will have on future films as well?
44. What makes a filmmaker independent? Can a filmmaker be truly independent? Provide examples of filmmakers and their films that you believe to be “independent.”
45. Discuss the role of nature (freedom, passion, spontaneity, feeling, chaos, anarchy) versus civilization (society, rules, artifice, form, reason, order) in *The Rules of the Game*.
46. A number of older black-and-white films have undergone a digital process called colorization. The people who have done this claim that colorization increases audience enjoyment of the films, while colorization’s critics claim that it damages audience appreciation. What is your view, and why?
47. Agree or disagree with the following statement, explaining your reasons in the process: Charles Foster Kane of *Citizen Kane* could be called a gangster without a gun.
48. Discuss the philosophical concept of existentialism—the idea that the individual is a free and responsible agent determining his or her own development through acts of the will—as it applies to the leading, female characters of *A Gentle Creature* and *Rosetta*.
49. Describe the extent to which the expressionistic *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* can be considered a horror film, if a horror film is defined as follows:

A horror film is an unsettling work designed to frighten and alarm, to cause dread and panic, and to evoke the audience's hidden, primal fears—often in a terrifying, shocking finale—while simultaneously captivating and entertaining viewers in a cathartic experience. Horror films thus often deal with spectators' worst nightmares and revulsions, as well as their terror of the unknown. The macabre and the occult are frequent subjects of the horror genre, and, as a genre, it may overlap with the fantasy and thriller genres. Horror plots themselves often involve the intrusion of an evil force, event, or personage, commonly of supernatural origin, into the everyday world.

50. In light of the statement below, discuss *Tokyo Story* as an instance of the marriage of the elements of Zen Buddhism to the cinema:

Zen Buddhism is not an organized religion with social and political concerns like Shintoism (itself devoted in part to nature worship, to the cultivation of a harmonious relationship between man and the natural environment) or Christianity, but a way of living that has permeated the fabric of Japanese culture for well over thirteen hundred years. In Zen, all living things are sorrowfully but acceptingly seen as transient and mutable. The fountainhead of Zen is thus a fundamental unity of experience in which there is no dichotomy or discord between man and Nature (in Western terms, this comes close to pantheism), and which permits the attainment of transcendental enlightenment through meditation, self-contemplation, and intuitive knowledge. For many Japanese Buddhists, the great threat to this communal Oneness has been “modernization” in the wake of the industrial-technological revolution, especially as such modernization has affected Japan during the post-World War II period.

51. The deep and fearful struggle for control of the self provided the great theme of the Weimar cinema in Germany from 1919 to 1933, at which point it was taken over and anesthetized by the Nazis. Delineate the role of the *Doppelgänger* (double, second self, alter ego, or “evil twin”) not only in the development of the action of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, but also in the *Doppelgänger*-motif's support for the thesis that there were underlying affinities between Weimar cinema's power-crazed protagonists and the fascist mentality that gave rise to Adolf Hitler.
52. Compare and contrast the flashback structures *The Road Home* and *Citizen Kane*.
53. Construct an eclectic or all-embracing theory of film (as opposed to a narrowly realistic, formalistic, or politicized one) that would allow for any motion picture of artistic quality, no matter what its form, style, or content.
54. Choose three of the following descriptive phrases and discuss the extent to which they are helpful in analyzing and understanding film art, and the

extent to which such phrases are restrictive, reductive, or even distortive. The phrases are: Classical Hollywood Cinema; New American Cinema; German Expressionism; Russian Formalism; Italian Neorealism; French New Wave; British Social Realism; New German Cinema; Fifth-Generation Chinese Cinema; and New Iranian Cinema.

55. Discuss the role of religion—that is, how it impacts the film’s drama—in *Winter Light* and *The Mass Is Ended*.
56. The critic Vernon Young once said, “Film criticism can usually afford to disregard actors in a film’s total effect.” Orson Welles himself once wrote, “I don’t understand how movies exist independently of the actor—I truly don’t.” With which man do you concur and why?
57. Agree or disagree with the following statement by the scholar Roger Manvell: “Film scripts are frequently published, but it is evident that very few of them can rank as literature.”
58. The director Peter Brook asked in 1964, “How can the screen free itself of its own consistencies so as to reflect the mobility of thought that blank verse demands?” What exactly does Brook mean here, and has the screen achieved this goal in such Shakespearean adaptations as *Much Ado about Nothing* (1993), *Hamlet* (1996), *Titus* (1999), and *The Tempest* (2010)? You may choose to write about relatively recent Shakespearean adaptations other than these four.
59. What is self-reflexivity or self-reference in the cinema? To what extent is it embodied in *How I Won the War*, and what artistic purpose does this device serve in Lester’s film? Can you think of any other notable films and filmmakers that make use of cinematic self-reference?
60. Which of the following two questions would you choose to ask, and why? “How does the adaptation of fiction and drama for the screen serve the cinema?” Or, “How does such film adaptation serve literature and the theater?”

# GLOSSARY OF BASIC FILM TERMS

**Asynchronous sound.** Sound that does not have its source in the film image.

**Available lighting.** The use of only that light which actually exists on location, either natural (the sun) or artificial (household lamps).

**Back-lighting.** Lighting in which the main source of illumination is directed towards the camera, thus tending to throw the subject into silhouette.

**Bird's-eye view.** A shot in which the camera photographs a scene from directly overhead.

**Close-up.** A detailed view of a person or object, usually without much context provided.

**Continuity.** The kind of logic implied in the association of ideas between edited shots. "Cutting to continuity" emphasizes smooth transitions between shots, in which space and time are unobtrusively condensed. "Classical cutting" emphasizes dramatic or emotional logic between shots rather than one based strictly on considerations of time and space. In "thematic montage" the continuity is based entirely on ideas, irrespective of literal time and space. In some instances, "continuity" refers to the space-time continuum of reality before it is photographed.

**Contrapuntal sound.** Sound that counterpoints, or contrasts with, the image.

**Crane shot.** A shot taken from a special device called a crane, which resembles a huge mechanical arm. The crane carries the camera and cameraman, and can move in virtually any direction.

**Cross-cutting.** The alternating of shots from two sequences, often in different locales, to suggest that the sequences are taking place simultaneously.

**Deep focus, or depth of field.** A technique of photography that permits all distance planes to remain clearly in focus, from close-up range to infinity.



**Direct sound.** Sound effects, conversations, music, or noise recorded simultaneously as the film is being shot.

**Dissolve, or lap dissolve.** These terms refer to the slow fading out of one shot and the gradual fading in of its successor, with a superimposition of images, usually at the midpoint.

**Dolly shot, tracking shot, or traveling shot.** A shot taken from a moving vehicle. Originally tracks were laid on the set to permit a smoother movement of the camera.

**Dubbing.** The addition of sound after the visuals have been photographed.

**Editing.** The joining of one shot (strip of film) with another. The shots can picture events and objects in different places at different times. Editing is also called montage.

**Establishing shot.** Usually a long shot or extreme long shot offered at the beginning of a scene or sequence and providing the viewer with the context of the subsequent closer shots.

**Extreme close-up.** A minutely detailed view of an object or a person. An extreme close-up of an actor generally includes only his eyes or mouth.

**Extreme long shot.** A panoramic view of an exterior location photographed from a great distance, often as far as a quarter of a mile away.

**Eye-level shot.** The placement of the camera approximately five to six feet from the ground, corresponding to the height of an observer on the scene.

**Fade.** A fade-in occurs when a dark screen gradually brightens to reveal a shot. A fade-out occurs when a shot gradually darkens to become a black screen.

**Fish-eye lens.** An extreme wide-angle lens, which distorts the image so radically that the edges seem wrapped into a sphere.

**Flashback.** An editing technique that suggests the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the past.

**Flash-forward.** An editing technique that suggests the interruption of the present by a shot or series of shots representing the future.

**Freeze frame.** An optical effect in which action appears to come to a dead stop, achieved by printing a single frame of motion-picture film many times in succession.

**Full shot.** A type of long shot that includes the human body in full, with the head near the top of the frame and the feet near the bottom.

**Handheld shot.** A shot in which the cameraman holds the camera and moves through space while filming.

**High-angle shot.** A shot in which the subject is photographed from above.

**High-key lighting.** Lighting that results in more light areas than shadows; subjects are seen in middle grays and highlights, with little contrast.

**Iris shot.** The expansion or contraction of a small circle within the darkened frame to open or close a shot or scene.

**Jump cut.** A cut that jumps forward within a single action, thus creating a sense of discontinuity on account of the temporal ellipsis.

**Long shot.** Includes an amount of picture within the frame that roughly corresponds to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch in the live theater.

**Long take.** A shot of lengthy duration.

**Loose framing.** Usually found in full-to-long shots. The *mise-en-scène* is so spaciouly distributed that the subject photographed has considerable latitude of movement.

**Low-angle shot.** A shot in which the subject is photographed from below.

**Low-key lighting.** Lighting that puts most of the set in shadow and uses just a few highlights to define the subject.

**Match cut.** An edit that links two shots by a continuous sound or action

**Medium shot.** A relatively close shot, revealing a moderate amount of detail. A medium shot of a figure generally includes the body from the knees or waist up.

***Mise-en-scène.*** The arrangement of objects, figures, and masses within a given space. In the cinema, that space is defined by the frame; in the live theater, usually by the proscenium arch. *Mise-en-scène* includes all the means available to a film director to express his attitude toward his subject. This takes in the placement of the actors in the setting or décor, their costumes and make-up, the angle and distance of the camera, camera movement as well as movement within the frame, the lighting, the pattern of color, and even the editing or cutting.

**Montage.** Transitional sequences of rapidly edited images, used to suggest the lapse of time or the passing of events. Often employs dissolves and multiple exposures.

**Negative space.** Empty or unfilled space in the *mise-en-scène*, often acting as a foil to the more detailed elements in a shot.

**Oblique angle.** A shot that is photographed by a tilted camera. When the image is projected on the screen, the subject itself seems to be tilted on its side.

**Overexposure.** Occurs when too much light enters the aperture of a camera lens, bleaching out the image.

**Over-the-shoulder shot.** A medium shot, useful in dialogue scenes, in which one actor is photographed head-on from over the shoulder of another actor.

**Pan.** A camera movement during which the body of the camera, which is otherwise stationary, turns to the left or right on its own axis. On screen this produces a mobile framing, or a constant re-framing, that scans the space horizontally.

**Parallel action.** A device of narrative construction in which the development of two pieces of action is presented alternately so as to suggest that they are occurring simultaneously.

**Point-of-view shot.** Any shot that is taken from the vantage point of a character in the film, showing what the character sees.

**Process shot, or rear projection.** A technique in which a background scene is projected onto a translucent screen behind the actors in the studio, so that it appears the actors are being photographed on location in the final image.

**Pull-back dolly.** A technique used to surprise the viewer by withdrawing from a scene to reveal an object or character that was previously out of the frame.

**Rack focusing, or selective focusing.** The changing of focus from one subject to another during a shot, guiding the audience's attention to a new, sharply delineated point of interest while the previous one blurs.

**Reaction shot.** A cut to a shot of a character's reaction to the contents of the preceding shot.

**Reverse-angle shot.** A shot taken from an angle 180° opposed to the previous shot—that is, the camera is placed opposite its previous position.

**Scene.** A unit of film composed of a number of interrelated shots, unified usually by a central concern—a location, an incident, or a minor dramatic climax.

**Sequence.** A series of scenes joined in such a way that they constitute a significant part of a film's dramatic structure.

**Shallow focus.** A shot in which only objects and persons in the foreground of the image can be seen clearly.

**Shot.** Those images that are recorded continuously from the time the camera starts to the time it stops: that is, an unedited, uncut strip of film.

**Slow motion.** Shots of a subject photographed at a faster rate than twenty-four frames-per-second, which, when projected at the standard rate, produce a dreamy, dance like slowness of action.

**Soft focus.** A visual effect in which the image seems somewhat hazy and not sharply defined, achieved by shooting with the lens slightly out of focus or shooting through a special lens, filter, or gauze.

**Split screen.** A visual composition in which the frame is divided into two separate images not superimposed over one another.

**Subtext.** A term used in drama and film to signify the dramatic implications beneath the language of a play or movie. Often the subtext concerns ideas and emotions that are totally independent of the language of a script.

**Subjective shot, or subjective camera.** A shot that represents the point of view of a character. Often a reverse-angle shot, preceded by a shot of the character.

**Superimposition.** The simultaneous appearance of two or more images over one another in the same frame.

**Swish pan.** A shot in which the camera pans so rapidly that the image is blurred.

**Synchronous sound.** Sound that has its source in the film image, where it is clearly identified.

**Telephoto lens, or long lens.** A lens that acts as a telescope, magnifying the size of objects at a great distance. A significant side effect is its tendency to flatten perspective.

**Tight framing.** Usually in close shots. The *mise-en-scène* is so carefully balanced and harmonized that the subject photographed has little or no freedom of movement.

**Tilt.** The vertical movement of the camera from a stationary position—for example, resting on a tripod.

**Two-shot.** A medium shot, featuring two actors.

**Voice-over.** Commentary by an unseen character or narrator.

**Wide-angle lens, or short lens.** A lens that permits the camera to photograph a wider area than a normal lens. A significant side effect is its tendency to exaggerate perspective. Also used for deep-focus photography.

**Wipe.** An editing device, usually a line that travels across the screen, “pushing off” one image and revealing another.

**Zoom lens/shot.** A lens of variable focal length that permits the cameraman to change from wide-angle to telephoto shots (and vice versa) in one continuous movement. The lens changes focal length in such a way during a zoom shot that a dolly or crane shot is suggested.

## CHRONOLOGY OF WRITING ABOUT FILM

**1896:** The *New York Times* publishes the first English-language article about film, a report on the “Projecting Kinetoscope” exhibition at Koster & Bial’s Music Hall in Manhattan.

**1896-1906:** Newly exhibited film programs are reviewed in synopsis form in daily newspapers throughout the United States, with very little evaluation or criticism.

**1906-07:** Trade papers connected with the cinema make their first appearance in America: *Views and Film Index*, *The Moving Picture World*, and *Motion Picture News*. Though intended for trade audiences, these publications contained columns and articles that began to discuss motion pictures critically.

**1908-12:** Frank E. Woods, writing under the pseudonym “The Spectator” for the *New York Dramatic Mirror* (a trade paper), becomes America’s first influential film critic.

**1915:** The epic motion picture *Birth of a Nation* (dir. D. W. Griffith) attracts so much attention in intellectual as well as popular circles that it fires a critical consciousness. The first film fully to utilize the artistic possibilities of the medium, it gives impetus to film reviewing-and-criticism as a professional activity practiced by writers for daily newspapers and monthly magazines.

**1916:** *The Art of the Moving Picture*, by the American poet Vachel Lindsay, becomes the first book-length attempt to distinguish the properties of film from those of the other arts. It argues for the recognition of the cinema as an art form and is the first attempt at a theory of film.

Also arguing for film’s status as an art, Hugo Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* approaches the medium from a psychological and perceptual point of view. Pre-Freudian, this major work of early film theory explores the relationship between the viewer and the screen image, thus foreshadowing future theoretical explorations.



**1919-20:** *Cinéma et cie* (*Cinema & Co.*, 1919) and *Photogénie* (*Photo Genie*, 1920), two early French theoretical works, are published by Louis Delluc, the founder of the film-club movement. With Léon Moussinac, Delluc is responsible for making European film reviewing a serious occupation rather than a forum for gossip, publicity, or mere plot synopsis.

**1920:** *Exceptional Photoplay* is founded by America's National Board of Review as a magazine devoted to reviews and discussions of current films. (The title is changed in 1926 to *The National Board of Review Magazine*.)

**1920-30:** American film criticism is limited primarily to individual reviews of current movies, although such reviews are increasingly written by distinguished authors like Robert E. Sherwood and Edmund Wilson and begin appearing in prestigious magazines such as *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

As an outgrowth of the dadaist and surrealist movements, many essays and manifestos are published in France articulating the need for more “art” and less “story” in films. These pieces are written by such practicing artists and filmmakers as Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, René Clair, and Abel Gance.

**1924:** Written by the Hungarian filmmaker and theorist Béla Balázs (but published in Germany), *The Visible Man, or Film Culture* is an early theoretical volume on the properties and strengths of silent cinema. It may have influenced the practical as well as theoretical work of the Soviet filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin. This is also one of the few books pre-dating World War II that evidences a “realist” persuasion where the cinema is concerned.

**1925:** The London Film Society is founded.

Formal film study begins to develop in France.

**1926:** *Film Technique* is the first major work published by the seminal Soviet theorist and filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin. Influenced by Pudovkin's study of editing at the Kuleshov Workshop, this theoretical work develops the “linkage” theory of film editing or montage.

**1927-29:** Two English-language journals appear that are devoted to serious consideration of the “artistic” film: *Close-Up* in Great Britain and *Experimental Cinema* in the United States.

**1928:** Sergei Eisenstein begins publishing the first of his many theoretical essays on film form in Soviet Russia. In these writings he outlines his theory of montage-through-dialectical-conflict in opposition to Pudovkin's “linkage” theory of film. Eisenstein's output is prodigious and often based on interdisciplinary approaches

to art. His essays are finally collected and published in English in the 1940s as *The Film Sense* (1942) and *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory* (1949).

**1930:** Béla Balázs's theoretical work *The Spirit of Film* is published in Germany. This book responds to the introduction of sound to the cinema, arguing for the use of asynchronous sound to accompany the image.

**1930-40:** Documentary filmmakers in Britain such as John Grierson and Paul Rotha write numerous essays relating the social consciousness of their cinematic approach to everyday reality. In this way, a concern for "realism" and a great respect for the "raw material" of life begin to arise to counter the notion of film as "art."

American film criticism, always more practical than theoretical, takes on a sociological and political cast in the work of Harry Alan Potamkin and Otis Ferguson.

**1933:** Rudolf Arnheim's *Film as Art* is published in Germany. This major work codifies the formalist position that film is a plastic art whose aesthetic should be based on its limitations, its very inability to reproduce reality—thus prescribing that the cinema's artistic function be *anti*-realist and expressive. Indeed, Arnheim's book denigrates the representational function of film and decries the advent of sound.

The British Film Institute is founded in London.

**1935:** *Film Acting*, the second major theoretical work by the influential Soviet filmmaker Vsevolod Pudovkin, not only explores screen performance but also continues his discussion of cinematic form.

**1936:** Henri Langlois founds the Cinémathèque Française, the Parisian archive/exhibition house that is to have such an influence on French filmmakers.

A first version of the German Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is published, in French, by Max Horkheimer in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* journal of the Institute for Social Research (Frankfurt). This work is one of the first to recognize the effect that production and technology had on the arts in the twentieth century.

**1940-50:** Cesare Zavattini and other Italian neorealists write numerous essays and manifestos promoting a realistic approach to filmmaking and film's function as a sociopolitical force.

Practical American film criticism reflects social and political concerns in the work of Robert Warshow, who sees movie genres as indicative of a covert American

mythology; and in the work of James Agee, whose social humanism is reflected in movie reviews written for *Time* and *The Nation*, and whose importance for the future of film criticism has been widely noted.

**1945:** Béla Balázs's *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art* is published in Germany. This major work is the culmination of the Hungarian theorist's practice and thought; it balances certain formalist principles of film as art with certain of the cinema's realist predilections, particularly in its discussion of the close-up.

In France, the filmmaker, film critic, and journalist Alexandre Astruc publishes an essay positing the concept of "caméra-stylo," or "camera-pen"—i.e., the cinema as a medium as fluid and able to deal with abstract ideas as written language. Astruc's piece called for film to express thought and go beyond a primary dependence upon the medium's visual elements.

**1951:** The magazine *Cahiers du cinéma* (*Film Notebook*) is founded in France by André Bazin, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and Joseph-Marie Lo Duca. Bazin becomes the major realist film theorist, publishing many essays examining the nature of film and exploring the cinema's realistic capacity through its use of *mise-en-scène* and deep-focus photography. A number of French filmmakers, such as François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard, begin their careers as critics for *Cahiers du cinéma*.

**1954:** "A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema," by François Truffaut, is published in *Cahiers du cinéma*. This essay attacks the stagnant French film industry and praises the work of American directors, thus establishing the groundwork for the *auteur* (authorial) theory of cinema.

**1958-62:** André Bazin's *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, a four-volume collection of essays and reviews, is published in France. This work is later condensed into two volumes, translated into English, and published as *What Is Cinema?* (1967, 1971). Bazin's collected pieces are less a coherent theory of film than instances of theory in practice.

**1960:** *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, by Siegfried Kracauer, is published in the United States. This massive work attempts a coherent theory of film based on the representational qualities of the photographic image. It is the antithesis of formalist theories such as Rudolf Arnheim's and represents the realist aesthetic.

**1960-70:** A worldwide outpouring of books, magazines, journals, and theoretical writings on all aspects of the cinema, from memoirs to scholarly studies, marks

the decade. Film study also becomes a serious subject in American universities for the first time. American film criticism itself is still review-oriented, practical, and humanistic, but will take a turn toward the theoretical and the ideological in the decades to come. The roots of ideological film criticism may be located in the events of the student uprising in Paris in the spring of 1968, in response to the government's attempted closing of the Cinémathèque Française.

**1963-67:** Stanley Kauffmann, the film critic for *The New Republic*, hosts the first American television program that treats the cinema in a critical manner: "The Art of Film," on WNET-TV, the New York PBS station.

**1967:** The American Film Institute is founded in Los Angeles.

**1969:** *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929-1968*, by Andrew Sarris, is published in the United States. This volume brings the *auteur* theory, and film theory in general, to America and posits its use as a means of approaching film history in a systematic manner. Sarris's book also creates an influential hierarchy of American film directors as determined by each one's personal style.

**1970-99:** Academicization and politicization of film study—in film courses, film departments, and film theory and well as criticism—in American universities. This leads, paradoxically, (1) to a shrinking of the audience for serious film, which now becomes the province of professors and graduate students rather than of the common, educated moviegoer; and (2) to an increase in the number of reviewer-publicists in the mass media. Practical, humanist film criticism, in the tradition of *belles lettres*, begins a process of long and slow decline.

**2000-15:** Rise of the Internet and, because of it, the increasing disappearance, not only of film critics from daily newspapers, but of weekly, monthly, and quarterly publications altogether—mainly those devoted to arts and letters—together with the proliferation of online movie reviewing. Practical film criticism thus becomes the province of the unvariegated many, as opposed to the select few. The long-term effects of such a shift are yet to be seen, though in the short term one can detect a decline in the quality of thought and expression at the same time as there has been an increase in the spread of "cineliteracy"—general knowledge about the history of films and filming.



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